

THE ROLE OF THE NARRATOR IN THE NOVELS

OF MILAN KUNDERA

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE REVIVAL OF AN UNFULFILLED EVOLUTION

Why does Anna Karenina throw herself underneath the train at the end of that novel by Leo Tolstoy? To one anonymous contemporary reviewer, the cause was racial: "She has the Slavik impetuosity and the Slavik weakness" (Wasiolek 120). To another, the reason was moral (and religious), "the wages of her sin is--death" (Wasiolek 122). Dostoevsky commended the novel's "psychological analysis of the human soul . . . and unparalleled realism" (Wasiolek 128).¹ The implication of Dostoevsky's answer, the most thoughtful of these three, seems to suggest that Anna's death was built into a causal framework supplied by the movement of "psychological realism" which was prevalent 120 years ago. This formation of episodes and characterizations implies that the actions, thoughts, and words of any character were products of the society or the sociological influences of the time or the era represented in the novel.

This formation, nevertheless, does not answer the question concerning Anna's character. Milan Kundera, in fact, raises the question in his critical book The Art of The Novel by suggesting that the impulsive action which

Anna undertakes cannot be explained away by focusing on causalities.² Kundera opposes Dostoevsky, for instance, for pursuing "the madness of reason stubbornly determined to carry its logic through to the end" (Art 59).³

Kundera is more interested in an unreasonable, unexplainable "irrational" side of fictive characters. He writes: "The terrain Tolstoy explores is the opposite [of Dostoevsky's terrain]: he uncovers the intrusions of illogic, of the irrational. That is why I mention him" (Art 59). Reminiscent of the existentialists, Kundera sees novelistic probing of the irrational as nothing less than a confrontation with existence itself. "Every novel, like it or not, offers some answer to the question: What is human existence, and wherein does its poetry lie?" (Art 161). And, in an earlier chapter of this critical work, "Dialogue on the Art of the Novel," Kundera concludes an interview with the declaration that "The novelist is neither historian nor prophet: he is an explorer of existence" (44).⁴ Kundera's novels explore hypothetical questions regarding humankind's irrational state of being. For if humankind is faced with irrational questions regarding existence, not only in the form of problematic characters such as Anna Karenina (or Emma Bovary, for that matter), but also in day-to-day life itself, a postmodern novel can no longer offer

reasonable answers to complex questions in the manner of a nineteenth-century one. "The novel doesn't answer questions: it offers possibilities," states Kundera (Granta 34). We must then look more closely at what Milan Kundera has in mind for this genre.

As indicated earlier, Kundera criticizes the "realism" of the stereotypical nineteenth-century novel where characters are the products of their own actions or society's actions. Instead, Kundera emphasizes the narrator--a figure who was generally used less playfully by Victorian authors than by Kundera's eighteenth-century models.⁵ Kundera states this situation even more emphatically: "But it was really only in the nineteenth century that the narrator disappeared completely" (Granta 35).

Comparably, Kundera objects to the rationalist liberalism of early twentieth-century "neo-realism," as in the novels of Aldous Huxley,⁶ Evelyn Waugh, and George Orwell. To Kundera, this movement resembles Victorian fiction in that the reader is again offered answers to questions through causal, reasonable explanations and easy interpretations through political readings. Given the earlier statements made by Kundera regarding novelistic theory, the opposition to a "political-realistic" novel is to be expected: "Novelists are not

here to denounce stalinism because Solzhenitsyn can do that in his proclamations" states Kundera (Granta 34). Regarding Orwell, Kundera goes so far as to say, "What Orwell tells us could have been said just as well (or even better) in an essay or pamphlet" (Art 12). In any case, political satire might be looked upon now by current readers and critics as being a mode prior to contemporary, literary trends; it is passé.

But Kundera's novels are centered around political life in Czechoslovakia during the last fifty years. When asked, "Why exactly are you offended by a political reading of your work?" by Ian McEwan, Kundera replied:

Because it is a bad reading. Everything you think is important in the book you've written is ignored. Such a reading sees only one aspect: the denunciation of a communist regime. That doesn't mean I like communist regimes; I detest them. But I detest them as a citizen: as a writer I don't say what I say in order to denounce a regime. Flaubert detested bourgeois society. But if you read Madame Bovary as mainly a denunciation of the bourgeoisie, it would be a terrible misunderstanding of the book. (Granta 25)

In other words, whether the novel is written in the 1850's or the 1940's, if it is "realistic" (given to "reasonable" answers to every question), it is not the sort of novel that Milan Kundera wishes to conceive, political or apolitical.

To some critics, this sort of emphasis on the irrational over the contrived "real" is reminiscent of the novels categorized as being "Modernist" novels. E.M. Forster's novel A Passage to India, for instance, leaves the reader with a question similar to the Anna Karenina question: "What really happened to Miss Quested in the Marabar Caves?" One wonders if Kundera's interests are not similar to the explorations of the irrational in Forster's novel (as well as Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, Ford's The Good Soldier, James' The Golden Bowl, etc.) in that his work, too, seeks to explore, not to answer, questions regarding human existence. To narrow the question further, the reader might ask of Kundera's statements regarding the role of the novelist, "By exploring human existence in your novels, aren't you simply rewriting the psychological novel of the late nineteenth-century and the early twentieth-century?"

Kundera's statements in his critical book take the "role of the novelist" question much further than the mere "psychological" novel. Regarding Joyce's use of interior monologue in the novel Ulysses, Kundera states, "Joyce set a microphone within Bloom's head. Thanks to the fantastic espionage of interior monologue, we have learned an enormous amount about what we are. But,

myself, I cannot use the microphone" (28-29). Kundera, moreover, seems to suggest that he has moved beyond the work of the modernists, notably Joyce and Proust, by saying that Proust and Joyce "are the fulfillment, the completion of a long process of evolution that goes back to Flaubert" (Granta 36). Further inquiry into this matter might show that Kundera feels that the novels written by Flaubert, Tolstoy, Eliot, James, Proust, and Joyce (and numerous others) are investigations into the irrational but only in terms of the psychological state of the characters, not existence itself. In a very telling statement, Kundera overthrows any hints of a liaison with the modernist movement by stating: "If I locate myself outside the so-called psychological novel, that does not mean that I wish to deprive my characters of an interior life. It means only that there are other enigmas, other questions that my novels pursue primarily (Art 27). We are confronted, once again, with the consideration that Kundera's concept of the role of the novelist is very much a break with tradition since this exploration into human existence has not been adequately accomplished by earlier writers (so Kundera seems to suggest).

In determining precisely what Kundera intends for this new sort of novelist, I turn the direction of this study not towards answers to explorations into human existence. Kundera himself, as cited earlier, believes the novel to be an exploration of possible answers. The interest of this thesis, then, is not a study of what possible answers are available in Kundera's five novels, but how Kundera strives to investigate these questions; how Kundera's ideas on the composition of the novel characterize him as postmodern; how, specifically, Kundera strives to achieve this new form.

The Eighteenth-Century Influence

One could argue that Kundera's associations with eighteenth-century novelistic experimentation require no comment. For indeed, the Czech novelist's playfulness in his five novels (The Joke, Life is Elsewhere, The Farewell Party, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, and The Unbearable Lightness of Being⁷) bears a strong resemblance to the digressive explorations found in the novels of the masters of that century, most notably Sterne and Diderot, and in Cervantes' seventeenth-century novel Don Quixote. Jacques and His Master, for instance, is an homage to Diderot's novel Jacques the Fatalist and his Master. Yet the influence of these early pioneers of

the novel (a label which Kundera's remarks suggest) on Kundera's work could hardly be referred to as casual. The statements which Kundera makes in The Art of the Novel (as well as other interviews, articles, and speeches) indicate that he has built his whole narratorial approach around these first novelists.

In the last chapter of the The Art of the Novel, "Jerusalem Address: The Novel and Europe,"⁸ Kundera states:

Lately, it has become a habit to speak ill of the eighteenth century, to the point that we hear this cliché: The misery that is Russian totalitarianism comes straight out of Europe, particularly out of the atheist rationalism of the Enlightenment, its belief in all-powerful reason.

The eighteenth century is not only the century of Rousseau, of Voltaire, of Holbach; it is also (perhaps above all!) the age of Fielding, Sterne, Goethe, Laclos.

Of all that period's novels, it is Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy I love best. A curious novel. Sterne starts it by describing the night when Tristram was conceived, but he has barely begun to talk about that when another idea suddenly attracts him, and by free association that idea spurs him to some other thought, then a further anecdote, with one digression leading to another--and Tristram, the book's hero, is forgotten for a good hundred pages. This extravagant way of composing the novel might seem no more than a formal game. But in art, the form is always more than a form.

Sterne's contemporaries--Fielding, for instance--particularly savored the extraordinary charm of action and adventure. The answer we sense in Sterne's novel is a very different one: for him, the poetry lies not in the action but in the interruption of the action. (160-1)

Kundera's statements, when coupled with an analysis of his novels, are quite revealing in that the Czech author finds his own creed in the works of these men. For Kundera, the combination of the rational mind and the spirit of "play" of the Enlightenment is an appealing avenue for the contemporary novel--an avenue which he feels has been ignored for too long.

And, indeed, a glance at Cervantes' Don Quixote, Sterne's Tristram Shandy, and Diderot's Jacques the Fatalist and His Master, the three novels of the seventeenth and eighteenth century which Kundera mentions most in his book, shows the necessity of that combination of play and rationality for these three literary figures, for in Kundera's mind, the three works encapsulate the spirit of adventure and exploration into the raw, undeveloped land of the genre of the novel.

The spontaneity which pervades the narration of Don Quixote is one of the best indications of play in the early forms of the European novel. The reader is introduced to a multitude of narrative voices within the first book of this novel, each insisting that the novel is his. Cervantes (or the "implied" Cervantes), a translator, an editor, a fictional author, and so on enter into the diegetic framework of the novel in order to relate the story to the reader. Unlike the standardized

third-person narrators found so frequently in the nineteenth-century, Don Quixote presents a story to the reader which defies what would later become "the rule" in story-telling with its chorus of narrators.

More important to Kundera, however, is the story itself. In "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes,"⁹ Kundera focuses on the intentional comic aspects of Don Quixote by decrying the attempts of later scholars to rationally interpret the work:

To take, with Cervantes, the world as ambiguity, to be obliged to face not a single absolute truth but a welter of contradictory truths (truths embodied in imaginary selves called characters), to have as one's only certainty the wisdom of uncertainty, requires no less courage [no less than Descartes's rationalist ideas]. (6-7)

We are to understand, then, that Cervantes' game-playing with alternating narrators and a main character who never consciously reaches a state of reality (as far as the reader is concerned) is what seems to be an attempt to show an alternate side to Descartes' moral positions. Cervantes' purpose, though predating Descartes, can be seen as an attempt to explore the open territory of this new form of writing. Kundera admires this sense of adventure in the Spanish novelist and finds in Don Quixote a much more substantial "answer" to human existence than in the writings of Husserl and Descartes:

If it is true that philosophy and science have forgotten about man's being, it emerges all the more

plainly that with Cervantes a great European art took shape that is nothing other than the investigation of this forgotten being. (4-5)

It is no mystery why such investigations would appeal to Kundera. As I have already mentioned, for Kundera, the novel does not offer answers but possibilities. The "wisdom of uncertainty," for the Czech novelist, is a far more satisfying answer (for want of a better word) to life's questions of existence, and the novel, as opposed to philosophy and science, is the realm wherein Cervantes can avoid falling into the "either-or" categories of rationalist thought.

Just as appealing to Kundera is the "adventure" of Jacques and his Master since he finds Diderot's novel to be a work unlimited by the contemporaneous rationality of Voltaire and Rousseau. He states in this same chapter of The Art of the Novel:

The early European novels are journeys through an apparently unlimited world. The opening of Jacques le Fataliste comes upon the two heroes in mid-journey; we don't know where they've come from or where they're going. They exist in a time without beginning or end, in a space without frontiers, in the midst of a Europe whose future will never end. (7-8)

Kundera finds that this period in the novel's history is characterized by total freedom of the novelist, a freedom which only the novelist can know since the rigours of science and philosophy do not offer spontaneity and play.

Aside from the fact that Jacques and his Master play along with Cervantes' journey motif by traveling from some unknown location to an undetermined destination, the narrator of the novel, whom we can assume is Diderot (the diegetic levels extant in Don Quixote are not as complex here), acquires total freedom with his novel. Like a slap in the face of rational thought, the narrator constantly breaks away from the mimetic levels of storytelling to inform the reader that in Jacques the Fatalist and his Master, the narrative voice is the supreme being. Diderot spontaneously stops the story at intervals, then, to offer a variety of possibilities for the outcome of the tale, thus ensuring that the reader understands that anything can happen in a novel and that the freedom of the genre entails unlimited exploration. The journey of the two main characters of the novel and their investigations rival that of Diderot's "journey" into the unknown territory of this new form of literature.

As mentioned before, though, Kundera's favorite "exploratory" work is Sterne's novel Tristram Shandy. More of a biography or even a Bildungsroman than a pastoral adventure, Sterne's novel, for Kundera, offers a complete and uninhibited quest into the uncertainties of human existence through the uncertainties of the form of the novel.

Patricia Waugh's book Metafiction,¹⁰ a detailed study of postmodern experimentation with narrative modes (particularly voice), refers to Tristram Shandy as "the prototype for the contemporary metafictional novel" (70). Waugh's designation is succinct; as Tristram narrates his own autobiography, he makes constant references to the reader's presence, displaces the order of the events in his life, recognizes that his story will never be complete, and digresses habitually in order to "converse" with the reader while relating his life story. Sterne's digressions, like Kundera's fiction, offer no answers to human existence, but betray a willingness to explore the possibilities through the diegetic voice which is exclusive to the novel's form.

As Ilan Stevens indicates in his article on Kundera's play, Jacques and his Master, "Milan Kundera should be placed, together with Borges, Nabokov and Eco, as a writer who consciously calls attention to his personal precursors" (89). But Kundera cannot simply reverse time and space so that he can rewrite these three great works. Jorge Luis Borges proves this himself when in "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," he states:

To compose the Quixote at the beginning of the seventeenth century was a reasonable undertaking, necessary and perhaps even unavoidable; at the beginning of the twentieth, it is almost impossible. It is not in vain that three hundred years have gone by, filled with exceedingly complex events. Amongst

them, to mention only one, is the Quixote itself.
(Labyrinths 41-42)

Likewise, Oscar Mandel, editor of The Theatre of Don Juan, refers to George Bernard Shaw's remarks in the preface to his play, Man and Superman:

Now it is all very well for you at the beginning of the XX century to ask me for a Don Juan play; but you will see from the foregoing survey that Don Juan is a full century out of date for you and for me; and if there are millions of less literate people who are still in the eighteenth century, have they not Moliere and Mozart, upon whose art no human hand can improve? You would laugh at me if at this time of day I dealt in duels and ghosts and "womanly" women. (547)

Kundera, like Shaw, admits the change in European climate and the impossibility for the novel to carry on with "adventure" in an unlimited world. "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes" continues its discussion of the evolution of the novel onward from Sterne to Balzac, Flaubert, and Kafka in order to show the lost illusions of the genre. The idealism and delight with which Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, Jacques, his Master, and Tristram Shandy undertake their journeys (or tales as the case may be) has vanished from the world and Kundera, given his own background,¹¹ admits the condition freely.

Yet, with the Victorian era in the novel, Kundera sees an avenue which could have been avoided. Kundera wonders what happened to the playful spirit of the novel and its fascination with the exploration of possible

answers to the questions of human existence. And, although he recognizes the inevitability of the industrial age, Kundera ponders the disappearance of the entertaining digressive voice and the game-playing narrator. In the recent interview (1989) given to Lois Oppenheim, "Clarifications, Elucidations: An Interview with Milan Kundera," Kundera lambasts novelists of the nineteenth-century for "giving up the game" of the novel:

The betrayal of this first half-time [Kundera's label for the "neglect" of the nineteenth-century novelists] deprived the novel of its play essence . . . and diminished the role of what I call "novelistic meditation." (9)

Returning to Kundera's book, furthermore, we find that the novelist refers to the aspects of the nineteenth-century novel which he seems to disdain:

Afterward [assumably after 1789], the novel got itself tied to the imperative of verisimilitude, to realistic settings, to chronological order. It abandoned the possibilities opened up by these two masterpieces, which could have led to a different development of the novel (yes, it's possible to imagine a whole other history of the European novel . . .). (15)

We can designate Kundera's fiction, then, to be an attempt to pick up this displaced strand in the novel's history. For in the novels of the eighteenth century, Kundera finds the novel in its truest and most powerful form--not as a psychological study, not as a political diatribe, and certainly not as a simplified, causal

story, but as an exploration into the unknowns of the genre and, hence, into the unknowns of existence.

The "Pleiad" of Central Europe

Although not integral to this thesis, the influence of Kafka and what Kundera refers to as the "pleiad" of Central Europe, Kafka, Broch, Musil, and Gombrowicz (Oppenheim 8), must be discussed for a more complete description of Kundera's intentions for the novel.

With Flaubert's character Emma Bovary, Kundera, as mentioned before, finds the pull of adventure to be narrowing into disillusionment. With Kafka, Kundera finds the entire concept of adventure drawing to a close. Once an infinite landscape, Kundera's Europe held for the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century novelists an unlimited field of exploration. With Kafka, however, history, a primary theme for Kundera's novels, shuts the door on this exploration forever. Kundera states:

But the dream of the soul's infinity loses its magic when History (or what remains of it: the suprahuman force of an omnipotent society) takes hold of man. History no longer promises him a land-surveyor's job. In the face of the Court or the Castle, what can K. do? Not much. Can't he at least dream as Emma Bovary used to do? No, the situation's trap is too terrible, and like a vacuum cleaner it sucks up all his thoughts and feelings: all he can think of is his trial, his surveying job. The infinity of the soul--if it ever existed--has become a nearly useless appendage. (Art 8-9)

This dream (of infinite exploration into the self) ends for Kundera not only with Kafka, but also with the advent of World War I in terms of closing out any options for an unlimited and free European existence. "For Kundera, Kafka is the point of comparison and World War I the moment of illumination" (Misurella 41). The twentieth-century has placed limits and restrictions upon existential exploration for Kundera.

On the other hand, Kafka, for Kundera, is not only an end but also a beginning. True, Kundera sees the modernist movement as a time for exploration into human psychology with Joyce and Proust. But "at that moment in the novel's history [Joyce's Ulysses], Kundera says, Kafka wrote 'Enough of psychology!' in his notebook and decided to quit the quest taken up by Richardson" (Misurella 40).¹² What Kafka and the other three figureheads of this Central European "pleiad" begin is much more appealing to Kundera than psychological study.

In an interview with Jason Weiss, Kundera responded to the interviewer's remarking on his reading of Kafka at the age of fourteen by applauding Kafka's appealing use of the imagination: "The great experience of reading Kafka changed my way of seeing literature. Above all, it was a lesson in liberty. Suddenly you've understood that the novel isn't obligated to imitate reality" (408). And

in the "Dialogue on the Art of the Novel" interview, Kundera states, "The Kafkan world does not resemble any known reality, it is an extreme and unrealized possibility of the human world" (43). With Kafka, then, Kundera sees the European novel breaking into new territory outside of the psychological (for Kundera, the final destination of the "realists" of the nineteenth-century given the "failure" of the social activists). Closing the door upon the realms of human psyche and opening the doors to unlimited imagination and what Kundera sees as "oeneric narrative," a fiction resembling dream, Kafka's fiction is, for Kundera, the beginnings of the return to the "playfulness" of the eighteenth century.

Fred Misurella infers Kafka as saying, "What possibilities remain for mankind in a world where external determinations have become so crushing that internal motivations weigh nothing?" (40). The possibilities which Kundera sees after this statement and era represent a return to the expansion of the novel's form and return to open experimentation. But Kundera does not refer to the experimentation of this pleiad in a general, flattering sense. The Czech author sees, instead, a specific effort on behalf of the four Central European novelists not to "revolutionize" the novel, but to return

to some of its basic foundations. Responding to Lois Oppenheim's invitation to designate the perimeters of Central European fiction and the Modern novel, Kundera responded:

There are four great novelists: Kafka, Broch, Musil, Gombrowicz. I call them the "pleiad" of Central Europe's great novelists. . . . These authors are modernists, which is to say that they are impassioned by a search for new forms. . . . They are completely devoid of any avant-garde ideology (faith in progress, in revolution, and so on), whence another vision of the history of art and of the novel: They never speak of the necessity of a radical break; they don't consider the formal possibilities of the novel to be exhausted; they only want to radically enlarge them. (8)

Kundera's disdain for the social activism of the mid-twentieth century and the French anti-roman becomes clear with this statement.¹³ The Czech novelist is not interested in breaking away from the novel's form from, say, that of Orwell or Waugh since these novelists, according to Kundera, were attempting to break away from the novel's form themselves. Kundera, rather, lauds this pleiad for their expansion of a centuries-old form. He, like his four Central European predecessors and three seventeenth- and eighteenth-century precursors, seeks to return the novel's form to an undenyng exploration; a playful, digressive genre which incorporates Kafka's imagination and Broch's polyphonic narratives.¹⁴

A Specified Technique

Kundera opens the "Dialogue on the Art of Composition" chapter by stating that the three requirements for a novel which are unachieved in Hermann Broch's The Sleepwalkers are exactly what he seeks in his own work. These are stated as such:

- (1) a new art of "radical divestment" (which can encompass the complexity of existence in the modern world without losing architectonic clarity);
- (2) a new art of "novelistic counterpoint" (which can blend philosophy, narrative, and dream into one music);
- (3) a new art of the "specifically novelistic essay" (which does not claim to bear an apodictic message but remains hypothetical, playful, or ironic). (71)

To focus on Kundera's break with traditional modes of composition for a novel, then, is to focus on these three requirements, most notably the third.

The first requirement, architectonic clarity, deals with the use of "elliptical" forms of narration. Kundera seems to be saying in response to this first need for "radical divestment" that he wishes to shirk the traditional forms of narration by leaping into "the heart of things" (72). Since his novels explore pertinent questions to human existence, Kundera must not waste time with the usual techniques of character development, thorough description, "superfluous episodes" (73), etc. Instead, the Czech novelist states, "My own imperative is

. . . to rid the novel of the automatism of novelistic technique, of novelistic verbalism; to make it dense" (73). This break with tradition, however, is situated more in the area of theme than with composition. The purpose of these "strippings" of that which we have come to consider to be "novelistic" is to move directly to the overall exploratory question. And, since my purpose is to focus more on the role of the narrator, this Kunderian tenet will be deferred to other areas of study in narratology.

The second concept to which Kundera states a commitment deals with the "polyphonic" mixture of methods. To respond to this tenet, Kundera, whose definition of the term "polyphonic" seems to move beyond the standard definition of "simultaneous variations," focuses on his novel The Book of Laughter and Forgetting since each chapter of the novel, according to Kundera, is a variation on the theme or overlying question/exploration of the novel. Kundera refers to various anecdotes, essays, autobiographical narratives, and fables which he has created in the novel in order to answer this profound question on existence which is created at the beginning of the novel.

This "blending," however, returns to my earlier made statement regarding the influence of Kafka and Broch upon

Kundera's themes; while Kundera's "novelistic essays" bear some examination, it is not the purpose of this thesis to focus on the influences of music in Kundera's work through a study of polyphonic elements in his novels. In any case, the use of polyphonic elements seems to be highly prevalent only in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. Kundera's other novels make less use of the technique to such an extent that a full discussion of its appearance in all the novels would be unnecessary.

What does seem to be warranted is a discussion of the use of "essayistic discourse" in each of these five novels. Very little has appeared in the way of criticism for this particular method of narration in Kundera's work and in consideration to the Czech novelist's theory of the role of the novelist as "explorer," a study of this technique is in order.¹⁵ It is in the use of essayistic discourse that the role of the "intrusive narrator" is created to its fullest extent. And it is also through the use of the implanted essay through narratorial interruption that Kundera bears the closest resemblance to his eighteenth-century counterparts.

The use of essayistic discourse in a novel can be easily defined as a novel which incorporates an intrusive narrator who creates characters for the purpose of reflection on greater, more profound questions than

psychology through the use of digressive essays. These "digressions," as Kundera refers to them in his critical book (84), are philosophical reflections which serve not only to explain the actions of a character or episode in the novel, but to explore the existence of humankind.

Kundera states in this same chapter:

I've always constructed them [novels] on two levels: on the first, I compose the novel's story; over that, I develop the themes. The themes are worked out steadily "within" and "by" the story. Whenever a novel abandons its themes and settles for just telling the story, it goes flat. (83)

This explanation seems to indicate that all digressions are worked into the novel alongside the actual plot; never fully integrated into the usual traditional techniques of the novel in the way that Balzac would have embraced the theme of a story, but separated from the actual plot.

Kundera's use of this technique is not as cavalier as the novice reader might think. If Kundera prefers to ignore the works of Sterne, Diderot, etc., these essayistic discourses might seem meaningless and peripheral. On the other hand, since Kundera has stated a necessity for the novel to turn back to "play," the use of essayistic discourse through an intrusive narrator achieves this novelist's goal.

All of that meditation on kitsch [an essay built into The Unbearable Lightness of Being] is vitally important for me, there is a great deal of

it, but the tone is never serious; it is provocative. That essay is unthinkable outside the novel; it is what I mean by "a specifically novelistic essay." (80)

It is then through a study of this novelist's use of the intrusive narrator who prevents novelistic essays that we will arrive upon the best answer to our overlying question of "How?". Kundera's final artistic creed in terms of composition is: "To bring together the extreme gravity of the question [whatever that existential question may be for any of the five given novels] and the extreme lightness of the form [the technique under question]--that has always been my ambition" (Art 95). It will be the goal of this "exploration" to uncover the tools which Kundera uses to reach this ambition.

On the Nature of Digression

In a very telling statement on this use of digression in his fiction, Kundera states: "From time to time, I like to intervene directly [in my fiction] as author, as myself. In that case, tone is crucial. From the very first word, my thoughts have a tone that is playful, ironic, provocative, experimental, or inquiring" (Art 80). The novelist's statement presents a necessity for clarification on the types and the tones of the digressions since a general study of the usage would prove to be oversimplified and sophomoric. Thus far, the variety

of Kunderian digressions has been referred to only in a general sense by critics and reviewers.¹⁶ The critical emphasis on Kundera's narrative voice, moreover, has focused primarily upon the narratorial tone and the implications of the digressions themselves. Apropos to this study, however, designation of digression is necessary.

Loosely stated, there are six types of digressions present in Kundera's fiction: Definition Digression, Ironic Character Observation, Philosophic Exploration, Phenomenological Discussion, Metafictional Statement, and Psychological Observation. In the interest of clarity, I have defined each of these types below:

Definition Digression--When dealing with an existential code word or term, Kundera's narrator will digress from the telling of the story in order to define the word for the reader's understanding of the present or forthcoming action. "A novel is often, it seems to me, nothing but a long quest for some elusive definitions" (Art 127).

Ironic Character Observation--Although the tone of Kundera's narrative voice will be discussed later, a fundamental type of digression for the novelist involves interrupting the story, particularly in the midst of a pivotal action, to explain the situation in an almost

sarcastic manner to the reader. As will be seen in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and The Unbearable Lightness of Being, though, these observations are not always satiric. Since the technique has already been seen in the novels of Fielding and Diderot, however, these narratorial explanations can be seen only in ironic terms.

Philosophic Exploration--As mentioned before, the exploration of some existential question(s) remains the highest priority for Kundera's fiction. Digressions which analyze a question of human existence or philosophic state, therefore, are present in all five of Kundera's novels. This type of digression will be at the forefront of this thesis, though all types will be discussed.

Phenomenological Discussion--It is perhaps because of this type of digression that Kundera's work is read for political intentions. With the exception of The Farewell Party, each of Kundera's five novels include sections in which the narrator presents historical information, political information, biographical information, and social information on Czechoslovakia and other European countries. The phenomenological aspect of this type of digression will be explored in the Life Is Elsewhere chapter of this thesis.

Metafictional Statements--Occurring only in Life Is Elsewhere, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, and The Unbearable Lightness of Being, statements from the narrator are presented which assure the reader that what is being read is only a novel. Given the concepts of narration discussed in the aforementioned books by Waugh and Hutcheon, Kundera's metafictional statements seem to be the reason for his classification by the critics in the postmodern arena.

Psychological Observations--Similar to the ironic character observations, definition digressions, and philosophic explorations, the narrator periodically breaks away from the action of the story to explain and explore the situation in psychological terms. I give this type of digression a separate designation from that of philosophy since, in some cases, the narrator's spontaneous analysis is undeniably psychological, particularly in The Farewell Party and The Unbearable Lightness of Being.¹⁷

In some instances, what Kundera refers to as the "novelistic essay" or the "polyphonic essay" appears in the novelist's fiction. On these occasions, Kundera will employ most or all of the digressions listed above within one section or chapter of a novel, thus presenting the reader with his version of one of the techniques employed

unsuccessfully by Broch which can expand the limits of the genre. I do not include the novelistic essay in the list of digression types since their appearances in Kundera's fiction are seen by the reader as combinations of the digression types, not additions of the digression types (with the exception of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting which includes an autobiographical digression).

Whether or not Kundera's novels have followed what can be referred to as an evolutionary process, however, is not a sufficiently profound approach for this thesis to take. An introductory glance at the employment of digression in each of the five novels is in order, though, as preparation for the following chapters. I hesitate, on the other hand, to evaluate the use of digression for each work since each of the five novels, regardless of its "success," contain, in my opinion, the appropriate amount, type, and tone of digression for its explored theme. One should note only that a decisive difference exists between Kundera's first three novels and his two more critically and financially successful novels, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and The Unbearable Lightness of Being in terms of narratorial use of digression (and then, only in the metafictional sense).

The Joke, unique in that Kundera uses first-person narrators for the only time in his career thus far, is made up of seven sections told from four different viewpoints. Helena, the only female narrator, never digresses in her narrative sections. Kostka and Jaroslav, two subordinating narrators to the protagonist narrator, employ phenomenological discussions within their narratives. Ludvik, however, the protagonist narrator, seems to be the representative voice of irony for Kundera in that his narratives make ironic character observations, explore philosophic questions, define specific psychological situations and come close to metafictional self-awareness.

Life Is Elsewhere, an early experimental novel comparable to Kundera's two most recent novels, brings in the third-person narrator which remains in Kundera's canon. The digressions in this "satire," as some reviewers have designated it, locate themselves primarily in the areas of metafictional awareness and phenomenological discussion. The other four types of digressions are also employed in this novel, as well as an abundance of oneiric passages.

The Farewell Party, Kundera's third and intended last novel (to be discussed in chapter four of this thesis), refutes any evolutionary pattern some readers

may see in the novelist's fiction since it eliminates almost all types of digressions and simply tells the story. I include this novel in this thesis, however, since the narrator selects two paradoxical characters for his digressive attention. The ironic character observations seen in Ludvik's narrative sections in The Joke and the narrator's focus on the two protagonists of Life Is Elsewhere are employed on these two main characters with a minimal amount of philosophic exploration and psychological observation.

The Book of Laughter and Forgetting can be seen as a novel-length polyphonic essay in that each of the seven sections of the work is a variation on the philosophic themes stated in the title. Through metafictional digressions and phenomenological discussions, the narrator explains to the reader how the novel is to be perceived. This novel, then, employs all of the types of digressions presented in the three previous novels, to whatever levels of success, in its attempt to answer satisfactorily the questions which its title presents.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Kundera's most recent novel, explores some of the same themes as the previous work, but with a heavier amount of metafictional digression. Portions of the passages with narratorial digression in this novel resemble the literary

self-consciousness in sections of Life Is Elsewhere and ironic character observations in The Joke. Though the novel is seen by many critics as Kundera's best work, I would argue again that progress and success are not in priority for this discussion since each of the five novels seem to include the appropriate amount and combination of digression for the fulfillment of the specified theme.

On the subject of Kundera's novelistic attitude, one should note that Bruce Donahue's "Laughter and Ironic Humor in the Fiction of Milan Kundera," and Ann Stewart Caldwell's "The Intrusive Narrative Voice of Milan Kundera" appear to be the only two critical works with a direct focus upon the tone of Kundera's narration and narratorial digressions. I emphasize their work in this introduction for the purpose of designating that attitude since, as I have mentioned, Kundera cannot repeat verbatim the styles and attitudes of his eighteenth-century predecessors. Indeed, Kundera's ironic viewpoint is more in line with his stated creed: combining the gravity of the question with the lightness of the form.

Donahue's article, nevertheless, demonstrates the novelist's adoption of Enlightenment attitudes for the complementation of twentieth-century themes. The critic

combines eighteenth-century rationality and experimentation with twentieth-century existentialist concerns, for instance, by stating:

To those who say that the novel is dead, Kundera answers that its irony and serious reflections about reality are needed all the more today. Kundera's novels help us keep our sense of humor; they affirm the dignity of mankind that the Enlightenment, too, defended, and they reflect the same devotion to the betterment of the human condition through mutual respect, tolerance, and rationality. (76)

The ironic viewpoint, then, is a necessity for Kundera's novels since its presence clarifies the need for the sense of play in fiction in a world of absurdity.

Through the six types of digressions, Kundera is able to put the centuries-old rationality to use with a cynical sarcasm which is typically twentieth-century.

Caldwell's statements, on the other hand, are more directly associated with the "intrusiveness" (a debatable term) of the digressions since they use some of the same quotations from Kundera's interviews as Donahue, but with more specificity on voice. She states:

Kundera achieves this ironic perspective in his art by contrasting characters and situations and by his own comments to the reader, which both contradict and enlarge upon the thoughts and actions of his protagonists. For him a narrator is more than a voice who directs the telling of a story; it is the prime vehicle through which he achieves the ironic stance that is so necessary for writing effective fiction. Kundera's early novels show a progressive searching for a narrative voice that will be appropriate for achieving this effect. (47)

While not as conclusive as Donahue's statements on the result of this ironic tone in Kundera's fiction, Caldwell's statements are more direct in determining the nature and style of the digressions in the five novels. If "effective fiction" is Kundera's prime directive, nonetheless, it is, indeed, only in the ironic tone that the Czech writer can achieve his ambitions for the novel. And, when looking back to the discussion of Cervantes, Diderot, and Sterne, one finds that the history of the novel has not been able to incorporate the playful digression within its framework without a noticeable level of irony.

Returning to Kundera's theories on what the novel should be indicates that a study of the tone and the types of digression in each of his five novels will show not only the methods undertaken for each work, but the thematic purpose for each novel. If Kundera wishes to balance the playfulness of the form with the profundity of the question, it is in the study of his use of the ironic viewpoint for the six types of digression that we will be able to understand and gage success and effectiveness. For, if the purpose of the novel is to explore possible answers to existence, where else does the reader have to turn but to the narrator's (hence the novelist's) own voice within the novel for these possible answers and explorations?

Notes

¹Edward Wasiolek's anthology Critical Essays on Tolstoy includes the two anonymous reviews (Nation 6 Aug. 1885: 112-113, and Literary World 17 [17 April 1886]: 128, respectively) as well as Dostoyevsky's The Diary of a Writer: July-August 1877. Trans. Boris Sorokin. Paris: YMCA Press, n.d.

²I emphasize Kundera's critical study The Art of the Novel over other critical works on the Czech novelist since Kundera himself states in the unnumbered pages of the introduction to this book, "(Need I stress that I intend no theoretical statement at all, and that the entire book is simply a 'practitioner's confession'? Every novelist's work contains an implicit vision of the history of the novel, an idea of what the novel is; I have tried to express here the idea of the novel that is inherent in my own novels.)" The book is divided into seven named chapters; in this thesis, the book will be referred to either by its name or by the name of a specific chapter.

³An angry response to Kundera's remarks on Dostoyevsky appeared in a letter to the editor of New York Times Book Review from a Russian emigre poet, Joseph Brodsky. "Why Milan Kundera Is Wrong About Dostoyevsky" attacks Kundera's "Introduction a une variation," (Kundera's introduction to his play Jacques and his Master, 1981) for its agnostic tone and explanation of the necessity for experimentation with the Western novel. Brodsky is one of the few published dissenters to what he refers to as Kundera's "avant-gardism" (33).

⁴The two "interviews" which appear in The Art of the Novel are responses to hypothetical questions from hypothetical interviewers. "Dialogue on the Art of the Novel" (chapter two) is a reworking of an interview which appeared in Salmagundi 73 (Winter 1987) under the title "Conversation with Milan Kundera on the Art of the Novel," and "Dialogue on the Art of Composition" (chapter four) is a reworking of an interview which appears (in another translation) in The Paris Review 92 (1984) as "The Art of Fiction LXXXI: Milan Kundera." In lieu of footnote 2, these chapters will take precedence over the original published interviews. And, since the interviews have been rewritten by Kundera, all quotations from these interviews which appear in this thesis will be cited in the present tense.

⁵Narratorial playfulness in the nineteenth century occurs slightly in Sartor Resartus, Vanity Fair, Hard Times, and Adam Bede (to name some of the very few examples).

⁶Though Huxley's Point Counter Point is an obvious exception to this generalization.

⁷For this thesis, I will use the Penguin editions of The Joke, Life Is Elsewhere, The Farewell Party, and The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and the Harper & Row edition of The Unbearable Lightness of Being since these copies are the most accessible and (in some cases) the only English translations available of Kundera's fiction.

⁸This chapter is Kundera's rewriting of the speech which he gave upon receiving the Jerusalem Prize for Literature on the Freedom of Man in Society in May, 1985. The speech was originally published as "Man Thinks, God Laughs." The chapter consolidates many of the ideas which Kundera discusses in "Introduction to a Variation" and "The Novel and Europe." In lieu of footnote 2, I will give precedence to the version found in The Art of the Novel.

⁹"The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes" originally appeared in different form as "The Novel and Europe" (see footnote 8) and shares many of the same ideas as are presented in "Jerusalem Address: The Novel and Europe." I give precedence to the chapter over the article as previously indicated.

¹⁰Metafiction (1984) and A Poetics of Postmodernism (Linda Hutcheon 1988) are two of the more articulate theory books of the mid to late 1980's to focus on the metafictional aspect of contemporary fiction. Neither of the two theorists, unfortunately, devotes a substantial degree of attention in Kundera in her book.

¹¹Kundera was born in Brno in 1929 and lived in Czechoslovakia until 1975. Having spent the first 44 years of his life in this country, Kundera was witness to the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Stalinist purges, the communist putsch of 1948, and the Russian invasion of 1968. Kundera joined the communist Party in 1948, was expelled in 1950, re-admitted in 1956 after the Party's Twentieth Congress, and was expelled again in 1970 after the Prague Spring. For further information on Kundera's political experiences, see the Introduction to Glen Brand's Milan Kundera: An Annotated Bibliography.

¹²Fred Misurella's "Milan Kundera and the Central European Style" offers one of the more thoughtful and articulate explorations into Kundera's relationship with other Central European novelists by outlining the main tenets of their fictions.

¹³Kundera's statements here regarding literary movements and revolutions imply a denial of associations with a postmodern movement. He has never made any statements, in his novels or otherwise, which would intentionally categorize his fiction or theories with that of the current trend. Evidence to the contrary exists, however.

¹⁴Despite his self-proclaimed admiration for the four writers, Kundera shows a partiality to Kafka and Broch. Parts Three and Five of The Art of the Novel, "Notes Inspired by 'The Sleepwalkers,'" and "Somewhere Behind" are sections devoted to Broch and Kafka respectively.

¹⁵There is, indeed a high percentage of Kundera criticism which devotes its attention to the narrative techniques of the Czech novelist. To my knowledge, however, only three articles to date focus specifically on the ironic tone and digressive techniques of the narrators of the five novels. Ann Stewart Caldwell's "The Intrusive Narrative Voice of Milan Kundera" is the most direct of these three articles since her discussion explores the basic reasons for the narrator's "intrusions." E.L. Doctorow's review of The Unbearable Lightness of Being, "Four Characters Under Two Tyrannies," though operating on unexamined analogies, provides some thoughtful ideas regarding the nature of a metafictional narrator. On the subject of the irony of narrative voice, Bruce Donahue's "Laughter and Ironic Humor in the Fiction of Milan Kundera" gives a succinct explanation of the need for the ironic voice in Kundera's novels when approaching the themes therein.

¹⁶Fred Misurella's article describes Kundera's narrative voice as "an ironic, personal narrative voice that combines sentimentality with an aloof, intellectual, darkly philosophic humor; and, finally, a willingness to mix essay with narrative, reality with fiction, regarding them all as equally relevant to the novelist's art" (40-41). E.L. Doctorow's review states that Kundera's fictive characters "all exemplify the central act of his imagination, which is to conceive of a paradox and express it elegantly. The paradox he is most fond of is the essential identity of opposites, and he plays with it

over and over again, with minor characters as well as major ones and with little essays and one-line observations" (45).

¹⁷For the sake of clarity, I will capitalize these designated terms throughout this thesis.

CHAPTER II

THE JOKE:

THE NARRATOR WEARS A MASK

Kundera's first novel The Joke achieved international fame for him on several levels.¹ He himself even emphasizes the changes which the novel wrought upon his life in a short piece appropriately titled "The Making of a Writer":

A year later [a year after The Joke appeared in Czechoslovakia (1967)] Russian tanks crossed the border. Czech intellectuals and Czech culture in general underwent atrocious persecution. Since I was blacklisted as one of the instigators of the counterrevolution, my books were banned and my name removed even from the telephone book. And all because of "The Joke." (27)

Also since the publication of this novel, Kundera has been forced into exile by Soviet occupied Czechoslovakia and has been forced to publish his work from his home in Paris, a fate which could be further attributed to this single cause: The Joke.

A biographical study of the effects of this novel, nevertheless, would not seem to serve any purpose to this study since The Joke, despite its existence as a first novel, finds itself linked to Kundera's artistic creed. Combining the gravity of the question with the lightness of the form is a principle of Kundera's (as mentioned earlier) which can be applied even to this early and

somewhat atypical effort of the novelist. Although the more highly critical statements made by Kundera concerning his intentions for the novel cannot be found until the early 1980s, The Joke can still be understood as a participatory novel within Kundera's scheme.²

The Joke differs from Kundera's subsequent four novels in that it is, as Lubomir Dolezel says, a "multi-perspective" novel which uses a "heterogeneous narrative form" (112, 113). By using four shifting "points of view" to relate the story of the novel to the reader, Kundera presents a novel employing a classical form of "story-telling," but a style to which he has never returned.³

What might seem to be surprising, though, is the fact that despite this singular instance of heterogeneous narrative form, Kundera manages to embed what has been referred to as his intrusive narrative voice within at least three of these narrators, arguably within all four. Ann Stewart Caldwell states in "The Intrusive Narrative Voice of Milan Kundera" that in The Joke:

Kundera uses a polyphony of four first-person narrators, but behind each of the narrative voices is heard the playfully ironic voice of another, which, because of its intrusion in subsequent works, must be likened to the voice of the novelist himself. (47)

In more direct terms, each of the personalities of the narrators in The Joke can be interpreted as the one

personality of the embedded narrative voice found in the later four novels. And as mentioned in the introduction of this study, the metafictional narrative voice which is submerged (almost hidden) in Kundera's first novel is the same voice which supersedes all other voices in Kundera's fifth and latest novel.

Outlined in the final paragraphs of the introduction to this study, is the chief characteristic of this narrative voice which categorizes Kundera as postmodern: the use of the technique of "essayistic discourse" through intrusive or "present" narration. It is my contention that the various narrative voices in The Joke don this characteristic in that each "breaks away" periodically from relating the events of the story to the reader for the purpose of essayistic observation to explore questions of existence. There is, hence, no "higher" voice, typical of Kundera's most recent two novels, to interject digressions into the telling of the tale, but a group of narrators who digress in a similar manner for existential observation.

The question posed for this novel (and later novels for that matter) is: "To whom does the voice of each narrator belong? To the narrator in question, hence the character, or to Kundera?" In the "interview" "Dialogue on the Art of Composition," Kundera was asked to respond

to the statement: "But there are passages in your novels where you yourself speak out directly." Kundera's response is applicable to the question of narrative authority and possession: "Even if I'm the one speaking, my reflections are connected to a character. I want to think his attitudes, his way of seeing things, in his stead and more deeply than he could do it himself" (79). And later in this interview, although Kundera is speaking of his novel Life Is Elsewhere, the topic of the next chapter, the remark might still be applied to the multi-perspective techniques in The Joke: "Each [narrative point of view] has its own perspective (it is told from the viewpoint of a different imaginary self)" (87). It must be assumed, then, that although Kundera, as a novelist, has created the character/narrator for each part of The Joke, the digressions and observations offered by each of the narrators is formulated from the perspective of that narrator, not of Kundera himself.⁴

In order to lay a foundation for an analysis of these narrative personalities, however, a description of the actual story should be taken into account. The Joke takes place over a three day period in an unnamed Moravian town during "The Ride of the Kings," a celebration of a mythic Czech event. Ludvik Jahn, the primary narrator of the novel has returned to his

hometown in order to carry out revenge.⁵ Ludvik recalls (throughout the duration of part three of the novel) his experiences as a young, idealistic communist twenty years past. Having written a "joking" post-card to an overly-zealous comrade, Marketa, which states, "Optimism is the opiate of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky!" Ludvik was expelled from the communist party and forced to leave Prague to work as a blacklisted soldier in the mines of Ostrava. This expulsion was led, Ludvik recalls, by Zemanek, the man upon whom Ludvik hopes to carry out his revenge. Ludvik also recalls his disastrous experiences with a young girl, Lucie, during his sentence which resulted in Ludvik nearly raping the girl out of sexual desperation and Lucie's flight to the woods near the present Moravian town. Lucie's flight is recalled by Kostka, a former comrade of Ludvik and Ludvik's ideological nemesis, in a later section of the novel which Kostka narrates. Having served his sentence in the mines, Ludvik has decided to seduce Zemanek's wife, Helena, another narrator of the novel. Ludvik discovers after the seduction, however, that Zemanek and Helena have separated and that Zemanek is more than delighted to have Helena off of his hands. Dejected by this turn of events and the fact that his revenge (or "joke") has backfired, Ludvik spends the

evening of the third day (the seduction is carried out on the second day) with an old friend and fellow jazz musician, Jaroslav (a fourth narrator for this novel), who dies of disappointment in the final pages of the book over the failure of his attempts to instill a sense of mythological heritage in his son through "The Ride of the Kings."

Closer in relevance to this study than a summary of the novel is the structural composition of The Joke. The novel is comprised of seven parts: parts one, three, and five are narrated by Ludvik; part two is narrated by Helena; part four is narrated by Jaroslav; part six is narrated by Kostka; and part seven alternates amongst narrators Ludvik, Helena, and Jaroslav. In terms of time, parts one through four are narrated from the evening of the first of the three days of the novel (ending with Jaroslav's narration). Parts five and six are narrated from the second day of the novel and part seven is narrated from the third day of the novel.⁶

The theme of these occurrences and recollections on behalf of the four narrators seems to be in much debate, and although it is not the purpose of this study to determine what themes are explored in Kundera's novels, but how these themes are explored, narratological analysis should not be undertaken without thematic

reference. Judging from the numerous allusions made by recent literary critics to earlier, more political critics of The Joke,⁷ the novel's reception was more in line with a literary indictment of the communist era of Czechoslovakia beginning in 1948 than an exploration of existence. More recent criticism seems to focus on the theme of delusion and destruction of myth. Caldwell states, for instance, "Each [narrator] examines the roles he has played, the fantasies and pretenses he has used to avoid coming face to face with his real self. Finally, because of a joke that backfires, each is forced to see himself and his actions in the stark light of truth' (47). Kundera, in the article, "The Making of a Writer," is more to the point about his work:

But the cruelest joke of all [as opposed to the pettiness of action inflicted amongst characters and narrators in the novel] is played on every one of the characters by History. For all of them seek a political utopia that promises them paradise, and what they find instead of heaven is hell. The joke, which multiplies monstrously, engulfing them all, is not "just a joke"; it is a category of human existence. (36)

Thus, we can conclude that the themes explored through the essayistic digressions of the narrators focus more on "self-discovery" and existential epiphany than on the tired theme of political dejection, which seems to be the interpretation of Irving Howe's article on the novel, "Red Rulers and Black Humor," which was published in the

same issue of New York Times Book Review as "The Making of a Writer" and was printed right next to Kundera's article.

Helena

Out of the four narrators of this novel (Ludvik, Jaroslav, Kostka, and Helena), it is the female voice of Helena that does not fit neatly into the "Kundera Stand In" narratorial role. Not only is the writing style of the 1 1/3 sections of the book which Helena narrates different from that of the rest of the novel, but Helena is also the only female voice in the novel. Helena, furthermore, never digresses from discussing her feelings over certain events in her life to offer any sort of "essayistic observation." It would seem that Helena's narrated sections have been placed in the structure of the novel for the sole purpose of ironically countering the other three voices.

Lubomir Dolezel, who is the only critic to my knowledge to discuss each of the four narrators in The Joke in depth, focuses on the writing style of Helena's narration in order to show how the character differs from the other narrators:

Helena's naivete is also reflected in the style of her narrative. This style is very close to what is called "stream-of-consciousness style," an uncontrolled, unorganized, spontaneous flow of

freely associated motifs, trite phrases and expressions (117)

By discussing the use of indirect interior monologue by Kundera for Helena, Dolezel seems to be pointing to the fact that the reader is given her "flighty" and jumbled thought patterns in order to show the simplicity of her character. Earlier in the same paragraph, he states that "she [Helena] herself is incapable of a critical rejection of her myth and its phraseology. Helena's myth remains naive from the beginning to the end" (117). And, since her myths or "self-delusions" are so deeply programmed into her mind (as will be shown), it is indeed safe to assume that the flatness of Helena's character/narration is meant to be juxtaposed to the other three voices.

Helena's main section in the novel occurs as she prepares for her trip to the unnamed Moravian town on the evening of the first day of the novel. Recollections of the beginnings of her marriage to Zemanek and the birth of their daughter Zdena are combined with romantic reflections of your youth as an idealistic participant in the communist coup of 1948. Blended into these thoughts are expressions of yearning for the approaching rendezvous with Ludvik and thoughts of what to wear for the trip. Throughout this section of the novel, the reader becomes aware that Helena has never lost the

communist idealism which she possessed in her youth and that this romanticization of her past, her current marriage, and her meeting with Ludvik on the following day are results of constant rationalization.

The following paragraph (the last in Helena's section) should demonstrate these characteristics:

I was afraid, I thought of Pavel [Zemanek], of the spark of hope he'd kindled in me, I'm not cynical about my marriage, I'm ready to do anything to save it, if only for little Zdena's sake, no, that's not true, mostly for my own sake, for the sake of the past, in memory of my youth, but I didn't have the strength to say no to Ludvik, I just didn't have the strength, and now the die is cast, Zdena is asleep, I'm frightened, at this very moment Ludvik is in Moravia and tomorrow he'll be waiting for me when my bus pulls in. (20)

The reader may notice that Helena's monologue, typical of her entire narrative section, includes no digressions for existential observation. All of her thoughts seem to center around capricious wonderings, not essayistic discourse.

It is for these reasons that Helena seems to be atypical of the other narrators in the novel. True, her thoughts tie in with the concept of the destruction of myth and self-delusion, as mentioned earlier, but the shortness of her narrative section in the novel⁸ and the uniqueness of her style automatically set Helena apart from the other narrators as a possible antithesis.

Kostka

If Helena's narrative is presented for the purpose of ironic juxtaposition, then Kostka's narrative is presented, presumably, to counter Ludvik's three narrative sections. Ideologically opposed to Ludvik's cynicism and romantically involved with Lucie, Kostka's narrative reveals his character to be idealistic and fallible. Kostka, similar to Helena, presents himself as a naive believer in the communist party, romanticizing its tenets to the point of relating its ideals to that of Christianity. Though not as flat a character as Helena, Kostka is perhaps another "straw man" to be juxtaposed to the voices of Jaroslav and Ludvik, characters more in line with Kundera's own voice.

Another possible purpose for Kostka's narrative, which seems to be more peripheral to the novel than the other three narrators (his voice is not included within the polyphonous seventh chapter), is to illuminate the abstract character of Lucie, whose voice never enters the "chorus." Kostka recalls Lucie's arrival in the unnamed Moravian town and how she related to him her earlier experiences in Ostrava where she was nearly raped by an unnamed blacklisted soldier. Kostka also recalls the fact that Lucie's fate was turned over to him, his assistance in employing the girl, his attempts to apply

his idealistic faith to her character, and the subsequent romantic encounters he experienced with her. The fact that the reader is presented with the character of Lucie through two separate narratives (first Ludvik, then Kostka) is also another reason to consider Kostka to be a naive narrator. Lucie refuses to tell Kostka the name of the blacklisted soldier who tried to rape her in Ostrava, so Kostka is forced to speculate in his narrative upon a topic of which we, the readers, are already fully aware and knowledgeable (the reader realizes at this point that the unnamed soldier is Ludvik).

Despite this ironic juxtaposition, however, Kostka does fall into the category of narrators in this novel who devotes portions of his narrative to essayistic observation. It is mainly through these observations, moreover, that the reader is able to understand this overlying theme of myth-destruction and self-delusion.

The following passage is representative of similar passages in which Kostka digresses from the "representational" telling of events, conversations, and encounters to the "interpretative" observatory style of writing for the purpose of discussing his own theories on the coexistence of communism and Christianity:

The churches failed to realize that the working-class movement was the movement of the downtrodden and oppressed supplicating for justice. They did not choose to work with and for them to create the

kingdom of God on earth. By siding with the oppressors, they deprived the working-class movement of God. And now they reproach it for being godless. The Pharisees! Yes, the socialist movement is atheistic, but is that not a sign of divine judgment directed at every Christian? A condemnation of our lack of sympathy for the poor and suffering? (180)

Similar to later intrusive narrative voices, this passage is what Dolezel refers to as "interpretative" rather than "representational" since the paragraph "breaks away" from the actual telling of the story for the purpose of a dogmatic delivery of information. Prior to this separate paragraph, Kostka is relating the resistance of the communist minority to accept his religious faith and the resistance of his fellow Christians to understand his participation in Communism. Throughout his narrative sections of the novel, as a matter of fact, Kostka digresses from the telling of events for interpretative purposes a total of twenty times. The featured digression, one should note, is a clear example of the digression type which I have designated as Philosophic Exploration. Despite the fact that Kostka is not analyzing possible answers to his existential questions, he is doubtlessly breaking away from the context of the narrative for the purpose of pondering his personal philosophy in a way which prefigures the more exploratory and open-ended digressions of the metafictional narrator in the four novels which follow The Joke. Also, since

Kostka incorporates an amount of historical factuality to his digression, the employed example could be seen as the digression type designated Phenomenological Discussion. I should point out, however, that not all of Kostka's digressions are as "separate" from the context of the narrative as the example that I use.

In terms of theme, the short essay, once incorporated within the actual story, reveals Kostka's own lack of understanding for the situation in which he falls. Dolezel asserts: "The phraseology of Kostka's evangelical myth comprises the fundamental, distinctive stratum of his narrative style. Quotations and paraphrases of New Testament locutions figure as the most conspicuous device in that stratum" (118). Not only does Kostka's narrative consist of one-sided speculation concerning Lucie, but, as Dolezel points out, the majority of his "tale" consists of mythic dogma and fallible theories.

The myth is not entirely destroyed, however, through speculation. As discussed earlier, Helena's myth stays intact from start to finish. The fact that her narrative appears to resemble a journal entry ensures this naivete (Helena converses with herself, not with others in her narrative). Kostka, on the other hand, appears to be having a mental argument with Ludvik during his narrative. Kostka addresses Ludvik several times and

attempts to contradict Ludvik's cynical remarks. The reader is aware of the fact that the conversation is only mental, though, due to the fact that Ludvik's three narratives refer to Kostka only as a casual acquaintance met during the short, three day period as a face from the past. No mention is made by Ludvik to any philosophical confrontation with Kostka, hence, the reader is aware that Kostka argues with Ludvik in his narrative only as a preacher argues with a hypothetical atheist. This style of narration ensures that Kostka never fully loses his myth. "Destruction of Kostka's refractory myth is not completed; it is carried only to the stage of unsolvable dilemmas" (Dolezel 117). Kostka's narrative is completed with yet another interpretative digression: "Tell me, God, is it true? Am I truly so wretched and laughable? Tell me it isn't true! Reassure me! Speak to me, God! Louder! In this jumble of voices I can't seem to hear You!" (207). Due to the fallible nature of Kostka's philosophic exploration, the reader understands that the narrator's myths are shaken but left intact.

Jaroslav

Jaroslav's one and one third sections of narration, while possessing the more controversial qualities of the first English edition of The Joke,⁹ reveal the most

direct amount of essayistic discourse in the novel and result in a greater degree of mythic destruction than the other three narrators.¹⁰ Jaroslav's narrative takes place late at night upon the first day of the novel. The narrator considers the importance of the heritage of folklore in Czechoslovakia and demonstrates his distress over his son's lack of enthusiasm for "The Ride of the Kings" ceremony to take place two days later. Similar to Kostka's narrative, Jaroslav directs his thoughts towards Vladimir, his son, and recalls portions of a conversation which he had with Vladimir a few days earlier. The degree of importance of myth for Jaroslav is also placed against the cynical narratives of Ludvik, like Kostka's narrative, in that Jaroslav recalls as well an argument which he had with Ludvik some years earlier on the necessity of folklore in present-day culture. Despite these mental conversations, Jaroslav's narrative reads in terms of rational, reasonable argument. Unlike Kostka's use of biblical verses and religious propaganda, furthermore, this narrator's digressive essays are more factual and scientific.

A portion of Jaroslav's narrative reads as follows:

We roused old songs from their deathlike slumber. Those nineteenth-century patriots had put folk songs into song books in the nick of time. Civilization quickly pushed folklore into the background. By the turn of the century we needed folklore associations to bring them out of the songbooks back to life.

First in the towns. Then in the countryside as well. And most of all in our region. They worked to revitalize folk rituals like the Ride of the Kings, gave support to folk ensembles. For a while they seemed to be fighting a losing battle. Folklorists couldn't revive traditions as rapidly as civilization could bury them. (111)

The above passage appears within the context of the conversation which Jaroslav recalls having with Vladimir. This particular paragraph, similar to nine other paragraphs in Jaroslav's narrative, becomes so far removed from the "novelistic" conversation, however, that it becomes a separate entity, a "novelistic essay." Comparable to later interjections of thought made by the present metafictional narrator of the following four novels, Jaroslav's digression becomes a section of writing so removed from the context of the actual story that it bears a strong resemblance to the digressions of Kundera's eighteenth-century precursors.

Referring once again to Dolezel's essay, it should be mentioned that Jaroslav's first narrative section does not reveal a destruction of myth for the narrator. Jaroslav acknowledges only an opposition to his beliefs in the necessity of myth and the study and preservation of folklore through references to an indifferent civilization, his apathetic son, and the argument which took place with Ludvik some years past. Dolezel remarks: "Jaroslav's narrative monologue is very special in that

it gives a systematic . . . scientific account of his myth and its transformations. [It is an] interpretation of the interpretation . . ." (118). Jaroslav's account, then, does not bring about the destruction of myth (as does Ludvik's accounts), but confronts the myths through the hypothetical confrontations similar to those of Kostka's narrative.

The mythic beliefs of Jaroslav are destroyed, nevertheless, through the occurrences within the seventh and final section of the novel when Jaroslav realizes that Vladimir has rejected the celebration and has gone to the motorcycle races in Brno instead. This revelation of self-delusion is not made known to the reader through any of the six types of digressions from Jaroslav's narrative, however. Instead, the reader learns of the destruction of Jaroslav's mythic beliefs and confidence through narrative stream-of-consciousness wonderings reminiscent of Helena's narrative section.

Returning to Jaroslav's exclusive narrative section, though, it is important to analyze the style for the purpose of understanding how Jaroslav holds his myth together. For while Jaroslav's destruction is revealed to the reader in the seventh section of the novel through indirect interior monologue, his earlier narrative is told to the reader in a manner almost wholly essayistic.

Three of the chapters of Jaroslav's section, indeed, seem to be prepared essays on the importance of folklore with all references to the conversational context of the section given only in peripheral treatment. These chapters would fall into the categories of what I have referred to as Phenomenological Discussion and Definition Digression in that they inform the reader of the history of Moravian music and folklore while defining the basic tenets of these genres. Although not all of the digressions in Jaroslav's narrative are as clearly separated as the example I use (particularly the Definition Digressions found in this narrative section of the novel), the three chapters and the employed passage are indicative of Dolezel's term "interpretive narrative" and similar digressions found in later novels (particularly Life Is Elsewhere in Jaroslav's case). Dolezel states, "Jaroslav's expert treatise on Moravian folklore represents one extreme pole of the stylistic variety of The Joke, the other one being represented by the loose and spontaneous style of Helena's monologue" (119). Jaroslav holds his myths intact through a rational narrative style, but loses his hold on the myths through an external confrontation.

Ludvik

The dominant sections of the novel seem to belong to Ludvik, not only for reasons of quantity (3 1/3 narrative sections), but also for the fact that all other narratives have been created for and by Ludvik's narratives. Helena's narrative is presented, as mentioned before, for the sake of ironic juxtaposition to all other narratives, yet it would not exist in the novel but for Ludvik's vengeful plan. Kostka's narrative centers around naive attempts to understand Lucie, who would not have encountered Kostka in the novel but for Ludvik's actions. Similarly, both Kostka's narrative and Jaroslav's narrative would be without counterpoint or *raison d'etre* without Ludvik's cynical point of view for contrast and opposition. Jaroslav's narrative is partially free from Ludvik, as mentioned earlier, in that his devotion to Vladimir and "The Ride of the Kings" operates as a subplot to the novel (which later plays against Ludvik's own set of myths). Again, though, Jaroslav's narrative would not exist without Ludvik's counterpoints of argument. Kundera's concentration on Ludvik's narratives, then, leads one to believe that out of the four narrators to this novel, Ludvik appears to resemble the "Kunderian" narrator the most.

Perhaps because Ludvik's digressions refer to questions of existence and ultimate reality, this narrator is given such priority in treatment. And, while it is not fair to say that Ludvik is merely a mouthpiece for the Kunderian voice, given the novelist's earlier statements regarding characterizations, one could safely assume that Ludvik's observations closely resemble those of the later, third-person, metafictional narrators in later novels. Dolezel remarks that Ludvik's narratives present "the most profound and most conscious destruction of a myth. Mythological interpretation is replaced by critical analysis [typical of Kundera's later narrators]" (119). Ludvik's remarks are not convoluted with idealistic dogma resembling Kostka's narrative, nor are they given to factual, rational reason similar to Jaroslav's digressions. They offer instead a more exploratory and sound explanation of existential events through the ironic tone which is typical of the narrator employed by Kundera in the remaining novels.¹¹

It might be possible to write an entire chapter in this study on the subject of how Ludvik represents the Kunderian voice in this novel. I will here say, however, that Ludvik's digressions are more deeply embedded into the narrative than those observations made by Jaroslav or Kostka. For in Ludvik's situation, the illustrative

observations are those made on a more personal level of understanding; Ludvik's voice speaks as a "real" person, not as an idealistic communist (Helena), confused theologian (Kostka), or folklore scholar (Jaroslav, though Jaroslav's narration becomes a bit more "real" in the seventh section of the novel when he is not expounding upon ancient Czech customs). Ludvik's digressions, then, occur through spontaneous Philosophic Explorations, Ironic Character Observations, and Psychological Observations mixed in with the "representational" telling of specific circumstances in Ostrava or the Moravian town with fellow blacklisted soldiers, commanding officers, Lucie, Helena, Kostka, Jaroslav, or Zemanek.

Before examining one of Ludvik's longer observations, I would like to examine two passages found within Ludvik's main section (section three) in which Ludvik recounts his fall from honor with the communist party, his sentence in Ostrava, and his encounter with Lucie. Ludvik begins his recollection in the second chapter of this section with the sentence: "The events leading to my first major disaster (and, as a direct result of its uncharitable intervention, to my acquaintance with Lucie) might well be recounted in a detached, even lighthearted tone . . ." (22). At the end of this section, after Ludvik has recounted his experiences in the mining camp

(of which numerous political critics have made note¹²) and his incomplete attempt to rape Lucie, Ludvik makes what seems to be a direct statement to the reader: "I was more the object than the subject of my story . . ." (104). These two Metafictional Statements categorize Ludvik almost immediately as a metafictional character, speaking self-consciously of his "role" in a "story" and directing the tale to what seems to be a present reader. And since Ludvik is not only the subject (or object) of his story but also the narrator of his own story, the off-hand remarks and keen self-awareness seems to tie in directly to Kundera's narratological concepts.

In terms of longer observations made upon his own situation and human situations, for it is important to distinguish the difference between Ludvik's Metafictional Statements and his Philosophic Explorations and Psychological Observations, the following passage might be of use for analysis:

Nothing brings people together more quickly and easily (though often spuriously and deceitfully) than shared melancholy; an atmosphere of undemanding sympathy puts to rest all manner of fears and defenses and is easily comprehended by the refined and vulgar, the erudite and unlettered, and while it is the most simple means of bringing people together, it is extremely rare. It requires the individual to lay aside his culture-induced "psychological restraints," culture-induced gestures and facial expressions, and be himself. (58)

The passage falls within Ludvik's recollection of his first meeting with the lonely and isolated Lucie and the beginnings of their relationship, yet, despite the fact that the passage is relevant to the couple's situation, Ludvik offers the observation as a philosophical statement to explain any comparable situation or at least to explore the idea as a possible explanation. The passage, moreover, is presented almost separately from the telling of the tale; as if Ludvik wishes to break off from his diegetic role of narrator to become a spokesman of truth or, more accurately, to offer the reader a possible Philosophic Exploration or Psychological Observation for his and Lucie's situation.

This use of "outspoken" voice which Ludvik employs for his narrative sections is a style of voice which differs completely from the other three narrators. Helena speaks to herself. Jaroslav speaks to himself and to the absent Ludvik and Vladimir. Kostka speaks to the absent Ludvik and to God. Ludvik, on the other hand, seems to direct most of his thoughts to the hypothetical reader. On occasion, Ludvik even narrates as if the reader sits across from him in some fictitious location, asking questions, such as in the final paragraph of section three:

Lucie? Oh, yes: for fifteen years I hadn't set eyes on her, and it was a long time before I even

had news of her. After my discharge I heard she was somewhere in western Bohemia. I didn't go looking for her. (104)

Like the other narrators, Ludvik occasionally speaks to other characters in the novel in a hypothetical, non-present sense or to himself, yet Ludvik is the only narrator of the four who seems to be aware of the fact that he is actually telling a story to some sort of audience; a fact which runs concurrent with narrative modes used by Kundera in later novels.

Moving again in the direction of theme, though, Ludvik's style of writing becomes similar to that of Jaroslav in the seventh section of the novel. Yet, by this time, it is only Ludvik who makes the ultimate realization of the destruction of myth. Burt Feintuch reminds us of this existential discovery by relating Ludvik's situation to the underlying theme of "joke" and "punchline." He states: "In . . . many . . . cases, the punchline serves to remind Ludvik that he inhabits a world in which human relationships are distorted by unexpected forces which are beyond his control" (28). It is Ludvik's voice which ends the book by relating the carrying of Jaroslav's body to a waiting ambulance in the town, but the "representational" style of narration prevails over the "interpretive" functions of observations. The meeting of minds between these two characters,

however, finalize the novel with a conclusive defilement of the myth which Jaroslav has maintained for so long. In this closing chapter of the novel, Ludvik joins Jaroslav's jazz ensemble after a long absence in hopes of forgetting the discoveries made earlier in the day (Zemanek's attitude toward Helena). Their music is ignored by the large crowd of drunken young people who prove to be too great of a reminder to Jaroslav of his earlier disappointment with Vladimir (and indifferent young people as a whole), but the experience rekindles inspiration for the cynical Ludvik:

During those moments of high adventure, when our inventiveness, precision, and feeling for the group were put to the test [through improvisational, folk jazz], Jaroslav became the heart and soul of us all, and I was filled with admiration for the dazzling musician concealed within his giant-like exterior. Jaroslav too (more than anyone, actually) represented the devastated values of my life; he had been taken from me, and I (to my great detriment and disgrace) had let him go, my most faithful, most guileless, most innocent friend. (263)

Alongside of this thematic reestablishment of optimism for Ludvik is the use of "break away" reflection, again, though not as clearly separated as other observations. Ludvik pauses from the telling of the uplifting jazz numbers to reflect upon meaning and interpretation, though in more personal, less universal form.

Just as Ludvik asks in the novel (104), the reader is prone to ask at the end of The Joke, "Lucie?" The

question is valid since it is clear to Kundera's audience that Lucie has been intentionally excluded from the novel. The reader has no way of knowing this character's thoughts, ideas, intentions, or reasons in her interactions with Ludvik and Kostka. We know only the perceptions which Ludvik has of this quiet woman and the facts which Kostka relates in his narrative on her adolescent rape. The reader must assume that her exclusion is intentional since the narratives of Helena are presented, despite the fact that she is only a minor character and that, as this chapter shows, her narratives are incorporated into the multiperspective framework only for the purpose of ironic counterpoint. What is the logic behind the exclusion and mystery of this character?

From Kundera's "The Making of a Writer," one learns that it is Lucie's character that ties the novel to its original germ. Kundera discusses his original idea by stating:

On a visit to friends in the mining region where I had lived I heard the story of a girl who was put in prison for stealing flowers from a cemetery for her boyfriend. I projected her back into the period when I had lived there. I imagined the life of a girl for whom sexuality and love were tragically separate, for whom sexuality was the antithesis of love. Her life then came together in my mind with the story of a man who seduces the wife of a personal enemy out of revenge, thereby turning the act of love into a splendid act of hate. Two stories of the dichotomy between love and sex. It is their counterpoint that forms the novel's framework. (3)

Lucie's innocence and strong feelings of love, then, are viciously counterpointed by Ludvik's cynical, ironic, almost demonic (his sexual encounter with Helena can be seen only as a sadistic act [172]) narratives. This counterpointing of the paradoxical nature of love and sex, aside from beginning to explain Lucie's absence, is a theme which is applied more directly in Life Is Elsewhere, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, and The Unbearable Lightness of Being.

It is because of Lucie's innocent nature, perhaps, that Kundera avoids any narratorial exposition through her character. Lucie, as will be seen in the next chapter, is similar to Jaromil's doomed girlfriend in Life is Elsewhere, in that Kundera's narration, whether through the multiperspective viewpoint or the third-person viewpoint, is too potentially ironic. Any commentary or exposure through narration might destroy the innocence. Kundera himself seems to agree:

Lucie, who is one of the most important characters, has no monologue of her own; she is lighted only from the outside by Ludvik's and Kostka's. The absence of interior lighting gives her a mysterious, elusive quality. She stands, so to speak, behind glass; she cannot be touched. (Art 86)

It would not be fair for me to say that Kundera is afraid to touch the character of Lucie through his ironic narratorial skill, but I would say that her innocent nature and the "lightness" of her longings for love are

more fully explored through the characters of Tamina in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and the character of Tereza in The Unbearable Lightness of Being. As of the writing of The Joke, however, Kundera seems to demonstrate the power of the ironic viewpoint just as succinctly by never allowing the four narrators to touch or illuminate her character from the inside, through digression or representation.

I turn my attention away from this discussion of the four narrators, now, in order to focus on the ironic juxtaposition of each of their viewpoints. The Joke is similar to two other multiperspective novels which have been published since 1960: Wide Sargasso Sea (Jean Rhys 1966) and The Collector (John Fowles 1963) in that the reader is not only provided with more than one first-person narrator, but also with narrators who alternately recount identical events, discuss a third character, or even refer to each other. In Rhys' novel, for instance, the reader's attention is focused on the character of Rochester through Antoinette's narration, followed by a focusing on the character of Antoinette through the "eyes" of Rochester's narration. Similar situations occur in The Collector with the narrator/characters of Miranda and Clegg. The Joke differs from these works, as I have implied earlier with the discussion of Kostka, in

that the reader is given an ironic juxtaposition of events and characters in the story which has not occurred in such an explicitly controlled form before this postmodern era. Kundera increases the level of "play" and irony in his novel not only through the use of essayistic observations, but also through his only attempt to date with the use of multiperspection through heterogeneous narration.

Kundera's term for this form of ironic juxtaposition is "the lighting of characters" in that

Ludvik stands in full light, illuminated from the inside (by his own monologue) and from the outside (the other monologues all sketch his portrait). Jaroslav fills a sixth of the book with his monologue, and his self-portrait is corrected from the outside by Ludvik's monologue. And so on. Each character is lighted at a different intensity and in a different way. (Art 86)

As one should see, the technique is not new.¹³ On the other hand, the digressions from the three narrators of The Joke force us to see the technique from a different angle, particularly when reading Ludvik's savage and ironic narrative sections. The illumination technique may have been borrowed from Richardson's eighteenth-century works, but the level of irony and digressive explorations are reminders that Kundera's first novel is an original expansion on a traditional form. David Lodge, for instance, finds the narratives to be "ingeniously juxtaposed and counterpointed in a text that

manages to be both serious and moving and comic and ironic" (115).

Another point to consider is the fact that these novelistic essays from the first-person narrative point of view cannot be compared easily to similar digressions of first-person narrators in novels from the first three decades of this century. John Dowell, the first person narrator for Ford's The Good Soldier, may pause to reflect upon the story which he is telling, but only by use of personal thoughts upon the psychological states of the other characters, not through whole paragraphs which expound upon universal topics of existence. Similarly, the narrators of Gide's novels The Immoralist and Strait Is the Gate and the narrator of Proust's Remembrance of Things Past are not the sort of first-person narrators who digress to such a point as to present observations which ironically place themselves next to the actual telling of the story. Again, Kundera's keen sense of irony is employed within The Joke in order to place his role as a novelist outside and beyond that of any psychological novelist writing at the turn of the century.

One might find this first novel to be a proving ground for Kundera, then, in that he uses a classical form of storytelling for contemporary experimentation.

The opening use of the "I" narration, which seems commonplace upon first glance, quickly branches out into forms of writing rarely seen since the eighteenth-century. By the time that Kundera wrote Life Is Elsewhere, this narrative voice has removed itself to the omniscient, third person level which Kundera keeps through the writing of his fifth novel.

Notes

¹The introduction to Glen Brand's bibliography alludes to the critical praise the novel received, the problems the novel saw in English translation, and the political effects the work wrought upon Kundera's life (xvii-xx). Summarily, the novel was instrumental in Kundera's second expulsion from the Czech communist party and his subsequent joblessness prior to his departure for France.

²Out of 31 documented interviews, 19 were taken since 1980. The Art of the Novel was published in 1988.

³David Lodge's article "Milan Kundera, and the Idea of the Author in Modern Criticism" refers to The Joke as a "modernist" novel because of its use of first person narratives and complex time shifts (111).

⁴Given the idealistic attitude of Kostka, one of the four narrators in The Joke who stubbornly tries to equate communism with his own Christian beliefs, a correlation between the narrator's personality and Kundera's personality (self-proclaimed agnostic) would prove to be invalid.

⁵Ludvik's character narrates 3 1/3 sections of the seven sections of the novel and all events in the novel seem to center around his character.

⁶David Lodge's aforementioned article is most helpful in rearranging the structural order of events in the novel into a chronological order (111-114).

⁷Of the political reviews and articles of The Joke, Louis Aragon's "Preface" to the French translation of the novel (La Plaisanterie), George Gomori's "Dominant Themes in Contemporary Eastern European Fiction," Jiri Hajek's "Eugene Rastignac nasi doby, aneb zertivani M. Kundery," Irving Howe's "Red Rulers and Black Humor," and Ivan Klima's "Zert a Sekyra" are the five most emphatic in political interpretation.

⁸Not counting her participation in the final section of the novel, Helena's narrative covers only 10 pages of the text.

⁹Much of Jaroslav's narrative was removed in the digressions on Czech folklore and music, the topic of this section of this chapter. Kundera responded to the

unapproved alterations in a biting article "The Joke" by saying, "The mentality of a London bookseller and that of a Moscow official responsible for art seem to have a mysterious kinship. The depth of their contempt for art is equally unfathomable."

¹⁰Bruce Feintuch's informative article "The Joke, Folk Culture, and Milan Kundera's The Joke," while not focusing directly upon the elements of folklore in Jaroslav's narrative, recognizes the worth of these cultural elements by stating: "The novel is replete with references to state-endorsed and -manipulated folk culture" (22).

¹¹Interestingly enough, some critics have made note of Ludvik's character as an "absurd" or existential protagonist in the novel. Robert C. Porter's "Freedom is my Love: The Works of Milan Kundera" points to the existential process by which Ludvik is able to overcome his own self-deception through the skeptical and ironic outlook he conveys in his narratives. Jean-Paul Sartre himself wrote on The Joke in "The Socialism That Came in from the Cold."

¹²Irving Howe's "Red Rulers and Black Humor" focuses almost entirely upon Ludvik's revelations of the communist labor camp.

¹³David Lodge's article states, "And as with all multiple-viewpoint novels, from Samuel Richardson's onwards, we are frequently afforded different subjective versions of the 'same' event, to ironic and instructive effect" (115). Lodge also points to the reader's response as well by stating, "Both the three-day action in the provincial town, and all the analepses, are mediated to the reader . . . through the interwoven monologues of four of these characters . . ." (114).

CHAPTER III

LIFE IS ELSEWHERE:

THE NARRATOR EXPLORES

"INNOCENCE WITH A BLOODY SMILE"

At first glance, Kundera's second novel, Life Is Elsewhere, appears to be a vicious attack upon the youthful idealism prevalent during the 1948 communist putsch in Czechoslovakia. In fact, were a reader to move directly to this novel from The Joke, the immediate conclusion might be that Kundera decided to return to the limited character of Helena in order to carry out a demonstrative assassination of the blind political attitudes of the era through a focus on the character of Jaromil, the novel's protagonist. In his review of the novel, Paul Theroux describes the narratorial attitude by saying, "Kundera is shooting a clumsy fish in a very small barrel" (7). If Theroux's reading of Life is Elsewhere is correct, the reader may ask, "Is Kundera not demonstrating his skill in creating straw men?" Why would Kundera return to such a limited character type as that of Helena, anyway? What more is there to say?

What seems to be especially malicious in this novel, moreover, is the fact that with Life Is Elsewhere, Kundera moves into the use of the digressive narrative

voice and the third-person metafictional mode of storytelling. With this literary tool in hand, a quick assumption by the reader might fall in line with E.L. Doctorow's later use of the term "tyrant" in his review of The Unbearable Lightness of Being for Kundera's intrusive narrative voice (45). How easy it might be for Kundera not only to create such a simple character for the purpose of attack, but also employ such a condescending narratorial voice to intensify the digressive blows. A possible conclusion might be that the novelist has forgotten his own remarks regarding the social activist fiction of George Orwell and that Kundera has reverted to the period of the novel which he so methodically dismisses in The Art of the Novel.

A more searching exploration of this novel will reveal the inadequacies of these hasty assessments, though, since Life is Elsewhere is much more of a literary work than a simple and reactionary lampoon. Jaromil is much more of a topic for examination than an easily destroyed straw man. Kundera's metafictional narrative voice is not simply a handy tool for the sole purpose of relentless political satire. The novel may be satire, but to link this work with those of Evelyn Waugh and George Orwell would be to dismiss or to ignore entirely Kundera's precise approach to questions of

existence which are so carefully explored by the ironic, metafictional, and phenomenological focus on Jaromil. Maria Nemcova Banerjee, one of the few critics not to address Life Is Elsewhere as a vicious political attack after its release in English translation in 1973, states, "On the most serious level of its discourse, Life Is Elsewhere examines the peculiar modern relationship between poetry and revolutionary power, finding it to be inherently incestuous" (132). In his preface to the 1986 Penguin edition of the novel, Milan Kundera, too, offers similar theories regarding the basic, underlying theme of this satire: "I wanted to solve an esthetic problem: how to write a novel which would be a 'critique of poetry' and yet at the same time would be poetry (transmit poetic intensity and imagination)" (vii). In a 1976 interview, Kundera was asked: "And so you have written a lampoon of poetry?" Even at that early date, he states of his themes and intentions: "Not at all. Not a lampoon but a satire. There's no exaggeration in my novel. It is much more an attempt to undertake by means of the novel, a phenomenological description of the lyrical attitude, the lyrical conception of the world" (11). If there is any unfairness or bitterness to be found in this novel, then, it is only inadvertent and peripheral to the deeper questions which lie below the

sarcastic humor so many readers have noticed on the surface of Life Is Elsewhere. Kundera's second novel may be unfairly satiric only incidentally, through the misinterpretation of the frequent Ironic Character Observation Digressions, but not essentially, due to the incorporation of Metafictional Statements and Phenomenological Discussions.

Returning to this sarcastic surface, though, one finds the beginning and the end of the novel to be an account of the experiences of the youthful Czech poet Jaromil. The novel opens with the question, "Exactly when and where was the poet conceived?" (3) in the first section of the novel titled "The Poet Is Born."¹ Jaromil is born to an obsessive and possessive woman called Maman in Prague, presumably in 1930. Affirming the prayers which Maman makes during her pregnancy that Jaromil will be a sensitive and poetic man, the hero of this novel soon comes to the realization that his mastery of words and deep significance to his mother make him unique and special in contrast to the rest of society. Following the drafting of his father in World War II, Jaromil accompanies his mother to a spa where the two become acquainted with a knowledgeable artist--a man who shares Maman's admiration for Jaromil's artistic talents and who introduces Jaromil to the surrealist movement. Jaromil

is pampered and kept at the center of attention throughout his childhood. As he reaches adolescence, however, Jaromil's talents as an artist and poet become a poor substitute for his real desire: to become a man (i.e., to lose his virginity). Jaromil thus overcomes the title of "child" so quickly bestowed upon him by the artist, Maman, relatives, and all prospective female candidates for his affection by denouncing his talent for poetry and adopting the current political fervor for socialism in Czechoslovakia (presumably during the years 1940-1950). Madly brandishing these powerful political affiliations, Jaromil and his poetry are applauded by the current officials. But Jaromil does not succeed in overcoming his role as "child" into which Maman persistently places him until he denounces his unattractive girlfriend and her brother to the Communist party. A week after this act of "manhood," Jaromil attends a party given by a politically ambitious beauty (Jaromil's ultimate sexual challenge) where he is kicked onto a freezing balcony after an intense argument with another guest over his poetry. Jaromil dies of pneumonia a few days later at the age of nineteen.

One label from which this novel cannot divorce itself, given the above summary, is that of the

Bildungsroman. Banerjee mentions this category of novel for Life Is Elsewhere in stating:

Kundera is taking off from another, more respectable genre of the bourgeois era in literature, the Bildungsroman. Jaromil's life story, with his premature success as an official poet counterpointed by a dubious quest for sexual manhood, is told with the cruel detachment of the satirist. (132)

And more recently, Kvetoslav Chvatik's "Milan Kundera and the Crisis of Language" states: "In fact it [Life Is Elsewhere] is an anti-bildungsroman, an ironical parody on the bildungsroman, for Jaromil does not grow more mature with the years" (30). The two statements are applicable labels for the novel, even if Kundera had no intention of writing a Bildungsroman. Indeed, that particular genre seems to have had its own history of the satirical, cynical third-person narration with Stendahl's almost sneering treatment of Julien Sorel, the young protagonist of Le Rouge et le Noir,² Thomas Hardy's sardonic narratorial attitude towards Jude Fawley in Jude the Obscure, and even the more sensitive depiction of George Willard in Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio seems to be related to the reader with narratorial tongue in cheek. The story of Jaromil does seem to invite the conclusion that Kundera's intention for Life Is Elsewhere was to write a satirical "anti-Bildungsroman" about a young man who never grows up due to his social

surroundings, thereby criticizing the Communist putsch of 1948 as well.

To examine the structure of this novel, though, would be to dismiss the idea that the work is only biographical. True, parts one, three, five, and seven ("The Poet Is Born," "The Poet Masturbates," "The Poet Is Jealous," and "The Poet Dies," respectively) focus more on the "representational" telling of Jaromil's life story with less focus on the "interpretational" (to use Dolezel's terms) voice of the narrator. Part two of the novel, "Xavier," is a direct incorporation of the "oneiric" style of writing. By describing certain episodes in the life of Xavier, a fictitious alter-ego which Jaromil creates, Kundera provides the reader not only with the dream-like "novelistic counterpoint" (discussed in my introduction), but also with a direct example of Jaromil's writing.³ More important to this chapter, however, are parts four and six ("The Poet on the Run," and "The Middle-Aged Man," respectively) in that these two sections designate the novel not as petty activism or satirical biography, but as a postmodern work which explores deeply the phenomenological relationship between poetry and revolt through the use of the digressive narrative voice.

The Poet on the Run

It seems absurd to reduce Life Is Elsewhere to the category of biography or standardized Bildungsroman when Kundera's narrator tells not only Jaromil's life story, but also includes biographical episodes from the lives of Lermontov, Shelly, Rimbaud, Wolker, Halas, Mayakovsky, Lautreamont, Byron, Eluard, Nezval, Rilke, and Breton in order to show the similarities between the childhood and adolescent experiences of the fictitious Jaromil and the experiences of these real poets through Phenomenological Discussion. By broadening the cast of the novel to include these other lives, Kundera explores questions which are not exclusive to Jaromil's life or to the era, but questions existing on a more universal scale. In a translation of an interview conducted for Radio Canada in 1976, Kundera elaborates upon this idea for Life Is Elsewhere:

Before I wrote this novel, I read many biographies of poets. Almost all were characterized by the lack of a strong father. The poet was born into a house of women. There are mothers who shelter a young poet excessively, as, for example, Alexander Blok's mother, or Rilke's, or Oscar Wilde's, or the mother of a revolutionary Czechoslovakia poet, Jiri Wolker, whose biography inspired me greatly - and there are cold mothers who are no less possessive than Rimbaud's mother. I then discovered for myself the following definition of the poet: a young man who, having left his mother, exhibits himself before the world to which he still hasn't gained entry. (11)

For Kundera to have undertaken a novelistic biographical definition of the poet, simply telling the story of Jaromil would have resulted in an inadequate explanation or an easily misread novel. By phenomenologically introducing other poets into his novel, Kundera tackles the enormous questions of definition with more power and universality.

The added advantage of this sort of approach to Kundera's questions is the fact that the lives of these real poets are incorporated into the framework of the novel in the form of digressions through the use of the metafictional narrative voice. For if the basis of the novel is to explore the answers to the questions, "What is the lyrical attitude? How is youth a lyrical age? What is the meaning of the triad: lyricism/revolution/youth? And what is it to be a poet?" (questions which Kundera declares to be the base of Life Is Elsewhere in The Art of the Novel [32]), the narrator must incorporate a more profound digression in this section of the novel than the Ironic Character Observation digression type seen in parts one, three, five, and seven. Throughout the fourth section of this novel, small, one paragraph chapters which discuss events in the lives of the real poets are blended with longer chapters which carry on the story of Jaromil. The narrator begins part four, for

example, by referring to the ending of part three, an episode in which Jaromil finally runs away from Maman's solicitousness and manipulation after his recent failure in a romantic relationship with an older student. In order to discuss the theme of the young poet (not just Jaromil, but all young poets--hereafter Poet) wanting to break away from the possessive mother figure in order to achieve manhood, the first chapter of part four reads as follows:

In every poet's life there comes a time when he tears himself away from his mother and starts running. Not too long ago he was still obediently marching along, his sisters Isabelle and Vitalie up front, he and his brother Frederic in the next rank, and his mother bringing up the rear like a military commander. This is how she paraded her children down the streets of Charleville, week after week.

When he was sixteen, he tore himself out of her grasp for the first time. In Paris the gendarmes caught up with him. He was sheltered for a few weeks by his teacher Izambard and Izambard's sisters (yes, the same ones who hunted for lice in his hair). Then his mother came to fetch him, slapped his face and her arms once more enfolded him in their cold embrace.

But Arthur Rimbaud keeps running away, again and again, a collar securely fastened around his neck, writing poet on the run. (161)

Not only does this particular chapter begin with an exploratory statement regarding the psyche of the Poet, but it also brings in an entirely new character for this novel within the story of Jaromil. Even the tone of the chapter seems to elevate the episode in Rimbaud's life to the same level of importance as any episode in Jaromil's

life. The second chapter of this section of the novel uses the same narratorial device, but on the poet Lermontov. Chapter six, likewise, treats Jiri Wolker as the topic for discussion, chapter nine--Frantisek Halas, chapter ten--Vladimir Mayakovsky, and chapter twenty--Percy Shelly. Throughout "The Poet on the Run," the digressive voice breaks away from the representational telling of Jaromil's adolescence to show interpretive parallels. With such juxtaposition, Life Is Elsewhere exceeds the limits of the Bildungsroman genre in order to offer a more profound level of discussion.

The juxtaposition of so many Phenomenological Discussion digressions within one section of the novel is a reminder of the insertion of "novelistic essays" within the narrative section of Jaroslav in The Joke. With Life Is Elsewhere, however, the short commentaries become much more direct and applicable due to the amount of control allotted to Kundera's third-person narrator. Whereas in Kundera's first novel, first-person narrators are limited in their use of the ironic stance, due to the fact that the role of narrator is embedded into the characters themselves, Kundera's second novel, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, is granted much more freedom in digression and commentary. Since Jaroslav is a character who participates in the story of The Joke, he is unable

to break off completely from the story for his essay on Moravian folklore. In Life Is Elsewhere, though, Kundera's narrator has total freedom and is able to insert pieces of biography from any point in time within the section of the novel in order to prove to the reader that the work is not an account of Jaromil's life, but an exploration of the essence of the Poet. This liberating role is used to its fullest advantage, as will be seen in chapter six of this thesis, in "The Grand March" section of The Unbearable Lightness of Being.

Though "The Poet on the Run" section emphasizes the need for possible answers to the overlying question on the Poet through Phenomenological Discussion digressions, the metafictional narrator of the novel takes the opportunity to explore the essential questions of the novel themselves through the use of Philosophic Exploration digression. True, some exploration of the existential nature of the novel is explored by the narrator in the odd-numbered sections of the novel, but, as I have mentioned before, the digressions seen in these sections are almost limited to the Ironic Character Observation type of digression. It would stand to reason, nevertheless, that the use of Phenomenological Discussion in "The Poet on the Run" allows the narrator a more direct opportunity to elaborate on the overlying

questions of the novel through digressions which are not limited to the characters (either real or imaginary), but which pursue more thematic aspects of the novel.

Chapter three of this section, for example, begins with two paragraphs which discuss the relationship between revolution and youth:

Revolution and youth are closely allied. What can a revolution promise to adults? To some it brings disgrace, to others favor. But even that favor is questionable, for it affects only the worse half of life, and in addition to advantages it also entails uncertainty, exhausting activity and upheaval of settled habits.

Youth is substantially better off: it is not burdened by guilt, and the revolution can accept young people in toto. The uncertainty of revolutionary times is an advantage for youth, because it is the world of the fathers that is challenged. How exciting is the entry into the age of maturity over the shattered ramparts of the adult world! (162)

The narrator follows this Philosophic Exploration digression type by moving directly back into the story of Jaromil in order to show how Jaromil's youthfulness and poetic spirit contribute to his increasing involvement in the communist putsch of the era. By breaking away from the actual representational telling of the story, however, the narrator succeeds in keeping the amount of "story-telling" in check. Life Is Elsewhere is a novel about the question of the Poet first, a novel about Jaromil second. With the digression foregrounded and events from Jaromil's life presented only to illuminate

these exploratory questions, Kundera's metafictional narrator maintains full control.

On the Nature of the Ironic Perspective

Since this is the first novel in this study to use such a style of narration, one immediate question which may come to mind is: "Why not let Jaromil and Maman, the only two characters (other than the real poets) that are fully explored by this metafictional narrator, narrate the novel themselves like the narrators in The Joke?" This question is reasonable because Kundera's first novel allows the characters of Helena and Kostka, despite their limitations in understanding their universe, to narrate their own sections. In his essay "Laughter and Ironic Humor in the Fiction of Milan Kundera," Bruce Donahue explores the differences between the "poetic" mind and the "ironic" mind by comparing Life Is Elsewhere to The Joke:

The act which Jaromil feels finally makes him a man is turning in his girlfriend and her brother to the police [the action which ends section five of the novel]; for him, this is a sublime act. Kundera thus exposes the myth of poetry; the poetic viewpoint is incapable of irony and hence easily subject to Joy with a capital J. The only goal of the poetic mind is beauty, and beauty, Kundera poignantly reminds us, is solipsistic and amoral. Lyricism can never be ironic about itself and hence runs the risk of being totalitarian. (71)⁴

Since Jaromil never fully matures, even after sexual experience and political involvement, his mind never

surpasses the "poetic" viewpoint. Certainly Ludvik's narrative indicates a full approval of the communist party in his youth in The Joke. His youthful idealism, however, is destroyed throughout the story and, as Donahue implies in this same essay, Ludvik subsequently achieves the ironic and cynical attitude which seems to be present in the viewpoint of the narrator. Helena's and Kostka's narrative sections, as discussed before, are featured primarily for ironic juxtaposition to Jaroslav's and Ludvik's narrations. Jaromil, hence, requires the ironic, digressive narratorial commentary in order for Kundera to demonstrate the "poetic" immaturity of his mind. The digressive voice must be used also to explore the questions which lie below the surface of the novel in a way in which Jaromil could not possibly succeed.

Maman's character, likewise, seems to demand the ironic perspective and commentary of the third-person narrator because of her inability to fully understand anything beyond the scope of her matriarchal role. In a very direct and succinct discussion of the relationship between Jaromil and Maman, Carlos Fuentes, a personal friend of Milan Kundera, states:

The poet's mother, who feels an equally absolute repugnance toward physical animality as her husband felt toward moral animality, betrays him not because she is sensuous but because she is innocent. When the father dies, the mother comes out of the kingdom

of the dead with her son in her arms. She will wait for him outside his school with a great umbrella. She will portray the beauty of sadness in order to invite her son to become with her that untouchable couple: mother and son, frustated [sic] lovers, absolute protection in exchange for absolute renunciation. (265)

Just as Jaromil is first and last a poet, Maman is first and last a mother; she is limited by her matronly role just as Jaromil is limited by his poetic viewpoint. And since the questions which Kundera explores in Life Is Elsewhere are questions which can only be answered by exploring these two personalities, Mother and Poet, the commentative, narratorial voice is a necessity.

Although Maman's character is explored more in the first chapter of the novel than in any other section of the novel, the fact that Jaromil is never able to escape his mother's presence throughout his life ensures that the "Mother/Son" question occurs frequently, even in the less digressive sections of the novel such as "The Poet Masturbates." One of the main Ironic Character Observation/Psychological Observation digressions occurs, for a more specific example of this exploration, in the fifth section of the novel as Jaromil argues with the unattractive, unnamed girlfriend over sexual matters. The metafictional narrator breaks from the conversation/story-telling to insert a short commentary on the mother/son relationship:

How they resembled each other, mother and son! Both equally bewitched by nostalgia for the monistic period of unity and harmony. He wants to return to the sweet-scented night of her maternal depths, and she wants to be that sweet-scented night, now and forever. When her son was growing up, Maman had tried to surround him like an airy embrace. She had accepted all his opinions: she became a disciple of modern art, she converted to communism, believed in her son's glory, denounced the hypocrisy of professors who took one position one day and another the next. She still wanted to surround her son like the sky, still wanted to be of the same matter as he. (221)

The digression is a short commentary which neither Jaromil or Maman would be capable of relating through a first-person narrative style; both of the characters are far too flat to be capable of digression. With the employment of the commentary from the intrusive narrator, however, the question is explored and the characters are analyzed through the necessary ironic "eyes."

On the subject of the difference between "The Poet On The Run" and "The Middle-Aged Man" sections of the novel and the other sections of the novel (with the obvious exception of the "Xavier" section), the question of narrative intensity should be approached. Although the odd-numbered chapters of Life Is Elsewhere tell the life story of Jaromil as a main priority, it should not be inferred that the amount of metafictional commentary is minimal. Given the example above, for instance, it is clear for one to see that the present third-person narrator never ceases to break in and out of the actual

story in the ironic mode. It is because of these four chapters, I believe, that the novel is interpreted as a fierce satire or manipulative diatribe by some readers. Even in relating simple facts concerning the lives of Jaromil and Maman, the narration seems to possess that level of humor and sarcasm mentioned as being present in past examples of the Bildungsroman. It is in chapters four and six, however, that the narration addresses the basic, thematic questions of the novel in such a clearly digressive manner. For if "The Poet On The Run" introduces the reader to the universality of the novel's phenomenological theme, chapter six takes the narrator almost completely out of the novel's framework for the first time in Kundera's career.

The Middle-Aged Man

With the sixth section of Life Is Elsewhere, Milan Kundera's narrative voice begins to experiment with the role of metafictional narrator to such an extent that the novel actually comments upon itself in the manner used in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and The Unbearable Lightness of Being. And in so doing, the novel overrides any surface criticism which reduces the novel to a simple lampoon. Chapters one, two, and seventeen of this section explain to the reader in a direct sense that the

novel is a tool for the exploration of existential questions, not a satirical biography of a flat, fictitious character. The use of the Metafictional Statement, then, which appears in a minor form in Ludvik's narrative in The Joke is taken to the point of Metafictional Chapter in this section. One might find section six to be, moreover, a built-in refutation of possible criticism to come.

A preliminary summary of the section should be presented prior to discussion. Approximately five years after Jaromil's death, the unattractive girlfriend is released from prison and goes to visit a middle-aged man with whom she was having an affair towards the end of her relationship with Jaromil in part five. The reader learns through the ensuing conversation between the two unnamed characters that the girl told Jaromil of her brother's plans for political defection only to cover for her involvement with the older man (hence, Jaromil's report to the police and arrest of the girl and her brother were inadvertent and ironic). The girl (and the reader) also discovers that Jaromil died the week after the arrests, an event which is related to the reader in full in part seven of the novel. The man and the girl eat supper after the conversation and he tenderly caresses her to sleep.

The reader, then, sees the girl from a different viewpoint; her character is illuminated not by Jaromil, her only source of illumination prior to this section, but by this new personality. Her character remains just as flat, however, since the narrator presents no commentative digression for either the girl or her companion. Why incorporate this section into the novel? Why does Kundera bring back the girl who, as discussed in my chapter on The Joke, shares the same "mysterious" characteristics and lack of interior illumination as the enigmatic Lucie? She is only a catalyst, presumably, for Jaromil's ladder to "manhood" in part five--why the return? And why introduce this flat character of the middle-aged man without providing him with much of a past and absolutely no future?

In a comprehensive interview given to Jordan Elgrably, Kundera's comments on the role of the narrator in Life Is Elsewhere further illuminate the Czech novelist's desire for a more phenomenological novel which explores questions concerning lyricism. According to Kundera, if the concept of the Poet is to be thoroughly explored by this novel, the narrator must have free and unlimited movement throughout the work. Certainly, this mobility explains the ability of the narrator to digress from the telling of the story to comment upon the

characters of Jaromil and Maman and to introduce other poets, living and dead, into the framework of the novel. Why should the narrator leave the novel entirely, though? And why should the narrator move himself⁵ beyond Jaromil's death to these two unimportant characters?

Kundera explains:

Already Life Is Elsewhere . . . is not situated exclusively in Prague. True, the protagonist is a native of Prague who never leaves the city. However, the novel's decor is larger than the decor of my protagonist's story. In effect, although the character cannot be in several places at once, the spirit of the narrator experiences absolute freedom of movement. I tried to develop all of the resultant consequences. Thus, my novel not only deals with events which took place in Prague, but with those in Paris during May '68; it not only deals with Jaromil . . . but also with Rimbaud, Keats and Victor Hugo. To phrase it technically: the decor of the novel is enlarged by the narrator's digressions throughout Europe. Jaromil's decor is Prague, the novel's decor is Europe. (Elgrably 10)

Jaromil, then, may be the main character of Life Is Elsewhere, but the novel's topic is not Jaromil. The novel is about poetry, revolution, youth, and motherhood, and with this question as an underlying theme, Kundera directs his narrative voice to travel in space and time, throughout Europe and throughout the past two or three centuries, uninhibited. The narrator must have this freedom in order to explore the question adequately.

It is possible, but not perhaps reasonable to quote the three chapters of this section in full. A sampling

of a few of the more "directly spoken" paragraphs, however, may serve the purpose of this discussion:

Just as your life is determined by the kind of profession or marriage you have chosen, so our novel is limited by our observatory perspective: Jaromil and his mother are in full view, while we glimpse other figures only when they appear in the presence of these two protagonists. We have chosen this approach as you have chosen your fate, and our choice is equally unalterable.

Man cannot jump out of his life, but perhaps a novel has more freedom. Suppose we hurriedly and secretly dismantled our observatory and transported it elsewhere, at least for a little while? Perhaps we could carry it a long, long way, beyond Jaromil's death! Perhaps all the way here, to the present, where there is almost nobody (his mother, too, died a few years ago) who still remembers Jaromil. (chapter one, 269; 270).

That young man, whom we have called Jaromil, must therefore never stray completely out of our sight. Yes, let us leave our novel for a little while, let us carry our observatory to the end of Jaromil's life and set it down in the mind of an entirely different character made of entirely different stuff. But let's not set it down any further than some three years after Jaromil's death, at which point Jaromil had not yet been forgotten completely. Let's fashion a chapter that would stand in about the same relationship to the rest of the story as does a small guesthouse to a country manor (chapter two, 271)

Thus begins the first chapters of part six. For the first time, Kundera begins to incorporate a degree of literary criticism into his novel itself through Metafictional Statement digressions (or chapters in this case). It almost appears that some of the comments featured in The Art of the Novel have been scattered within Life Is Elsewhere so that the reader may have a

complete understanding of why the story is digressing to such a distance. Without the digression, "The Middle-Aged Man" would be unintelligible; the reader would not understand the delayed decoding (why Jaromil dies "twice," so to speak, since part seven describes his death).

In this section of the novel, Kundera's displacement of time and space can only categorize the novelist as postmodern. To examine a more "traditional" novel, say of the nineteenth-century such as George Eliot's Adam Bede, we find that although the novel skips eight years between the final two chapters, the actual story is finished only with the final chapter, not before. With the use of digression, on the other hand, Kundera is able to break with the conventions of the novel in order to push the limits of the genre even further. Kundera's narrator does not wish to be ambiguous in his efforts and experiments, but wishes to clarify totally to the reader that Life Is Elsewhere is a novel which is able to explore the possibilities not only of existence, but of the genre itself.

Having explained to the reader the freedom of the genre, the narrator moves directly into his "guesthouse" and describes the conversation and physical encounter between the man and the girl. But at the end of this

section of the novel, in the final chapter, the narrator leaves the two characters and speaks directly to the reader once more:

The guesthouse to which we compared this part of the novel also has an open window and through this window we still hear the sounds of the novel which we left some time ago. Do you hear the distant sound of Death, impatiently stamping its feet? Let it wait, we are still here in the flat, in another novel, in another story.

Another story? No, not really. In the lives of the middle-aged man and the girl, the interlude we have been describing was only a pause in the story, not the story itself. Their encounter will hardly entwine them in an adventure. It was only a brief hiatus which the man granted the girl before the travail that awaited her.

In our novel, too, this section was only a quiet interlude in which an anonymous man unexpectedly lights a lamp of kindness. Let us gaze at it for a few seconds more, that quiet lamp, that kindly light, before it vanishes from our sight
(286)

The anonymous man lights much more than a lamp of kindness for the girl, and, since this study is being written after the publication of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and The Unbearable Lightness of Being, "The Middle-Aged Man" section of the novel appears to be much more than a simple pause in the story. One guesses that Kundera's narrator intentionally underestimates the significance of the section since the "guesthouse," juxtaposed to the rest of the novel, particularly the final section, illuminates the entire set of questions which have been the basis for the existence of Life Is Elsewhere.

Kundera's theory of the novel, the theory that the novel can say and do what only novels can say and do, is presented to the reader in concrete form, particularly through these last three paragraphs of the section. By lifting the narrator beyond the grip of circumstances of Jaromil's act of manhood and far beyond to an objective "observation tower," Kundera is able to explain that not only is the novel capable of doing such things as freely moving in time and space, but also that an examination of the character of Jaromil from "the present" distinguishes his actions, career, and behavior through juxtaposition. The fact that the reader learns of Jaromil's death before it actually occurs in the "story" only adds to this new, objective observatory tower. It is through this narratorial technique of the Metafictional Statement digression, then, that Kundera is able to cut through all of the myths surrounding the questions of poetry/youth/revolution. If Kundera's novel wishes to be a "critique of poetry," then it must be a novel which destroys all of the myths concerning the Poet.

In that 1976 interview, Kundera is especially direct about his intentions concerning the destruction of myths:

Understand me correctly, I'm not against the revolution, or motherhood, youth, or poetry, but I feel an irresistible desire to demystify myths. According to this mythical thinking, poetry

represents an absolute value. Therefore the poet can never be a fink, a police informant, as Jaromil is. (11)

The novelist does not wish, then to satirize the participants in the 1948 putsch, but he does want to explore the character of Jaromil as the Poet. If the only way to accomplish this is through satire and digression, then the technique must be used. By removing the narrator from Jaromil's experiences over a three year period, Kundera allows the reader to look back upon this subject and analyze him from every angle.

Carlos Fuentes discusses Jaromil's behavior as a Poet in that Jaromil's innocence, the innocence of the phenomenological poet, is the reality which the novel offers us, the reality which lies behind the myths:

The poet can be an informer. This is the terrible reality stated in Life Is Elsewhere. The young poet Jaromil informs in the name of the revolution, condemns the weak, sends them to the gallows, and innocence shows us its bloody smile.

Jaromil does not inform in spite of his lyrical talent but, precisely, thanks to it. (268)

By discussing Jaromil's death with the older man, the girl looks back upon the past three years which she has spent in a prison because of Jaromil's actions--actions which were based on lies in the first place. Once the girl discovers that Jaromil died shortly after becoming a police informer, the narrator reflects: "If he didn't exist, then the cause of her three-year imprisonment no

longer existed, and everything became a nightmare, nonsense, unreality" (279). The digressive narrator even glances back not only to Jaromil but to the entire era in order to understand this Poetic behavior:

What actually remains of that distant time? Today, people regard those days as an era of political trials, persecutions, forbidden books, and legalized murder. But we who remember must bear witness [which includes the readers who have just experienced the era through chapters 1-5]: it was not only an epoch of terror, but also an epoch of lyricism, ruled hand in hand by the hangman and the poet.

The wall behind which people were imprisoned was made of verse. There was dancing in front of it. No, not a danse macabre! A dance of innocence. Innocence with a bloody smile. (270)

Only by looking back upon the past from a present situation is the narrator able to show digressively to the readers the actual truth to "thy lyrical age" (which was Kundera's intended title for this novel). The odd numbered chapters of this novel, once again, emphasize Jaromil as a character and relate his surroundings, his actions, his family, and his intentions to the reader. Parts four and six illuminate Jaromil as a symbol for the Poet and the poetic spirit and enable the reader to understand Jaromil in relation to his poetic "brothers" and to understand his behavior within an era significant to the dangerous composition of poetry, revolution, and youth. It is particularly ironic that Kundera did not include "The Middle-Aged Man" chapter until after the

novel was finished (Art 85). The section is integral to understanding the entire novel.

Perhaps the novel can be read as a vicious satire against the young people who lead the putsch in Czechoslovakia in 1948. Perhaps Jaromil's character has been exaggerated to too great of an extent. One tends to doubt these hasty assumptions, however, upon a closer examination of these two, key sections of the novel. Whatever amount of comical bitterness or deliberate bias is present in the odd-numbered chapters, the depths of exploration of the fundamental questions of poetry which are illuminated in "The Poet on the Run" and "The Middle-Aged Man" manage to turn Life Is Elsewhere into a novel of much greater power than those of the social activists writing at the time of putsch. The questions may be similar to those of earlier writers ("Innocence with a bloody smile" bears a close resemblance to those children in Orwell's 1984), but Kundera's ability to create the playful irony so closely in line with other postmodern works makes Life Is Elsewhere a novel which pushes the boundaries of the genre to even greater depths.

Notes

¹The reader may note that as early as this first sentence in the novel, the narrator is speaking to the reader by asking metafictional questions of the novel's main character. The technique is used again in one of the sections of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting where the narrator "headlines" each chapter in the section with a relevant, metafictional question.

²The resemblance which Jaromil bears to Julien Sorel is more than striking since the latter's longing for sexual initiation and strong revolutionary fervor predate the same characteristics of the former.

³Responding to the early criticism of Life Is Elsewhere which focuses somewhat on Jaromil's "bad verse," Claude Roy was one of the first scholars to see the oeneric sections of the novel and incorporated examples of some of Jaromil's poems as fine verse or "ecstatic quotations" in his "Jeu de Massacres sur Grandes Figures."

⁴One should note on this point that although Maman and Jaromil probably would be unable to narrate their own sections due to the "romantic" natures and the heavy emotional content of their personalities, lyric poetry is now often seen as ironic. Regarding the narrator's attitude on the non-Slavic poets, one might see Kundera's attitude toward the lyric mind as being rustic, superficial, and old-fashioned (particularly with Rimbaud).

⁵Again, since Life Is Elsewhere is the first novel studied in this thesis to incorporate the metafictional narrator, I take the opportunity to focus on gender. Peter Kussi's "Milan Kundera: Dialogues With Fiction" touches on the subject with a short aside: "He [the narrator of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting] (not she--Czech grammar is clear about the gender of anonymous narrators) is puzzled . . ." (208). And, as will be explored in my chapter on the novel, the narrator in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting identifies himself with Kundera (which was also mentioned in my introduction). There should be little question as to the gender of the four narrators of Kundera's last four novels.

CHAPTER IV

THE FAREWELL PARTY:

THE NARRATOR EXAMINES

THE PARADOXES IN A FARCE

Kundera's third novel, The Farewell Party, breaks almost completely with the use of experimentation with narration that is present in The Joke and Life Is Elsewhere. Little of the novel lends itself to a discussion of the metafictional narrator in Kundera's canon. Kundera himself even admits the disparateness of The Farewell Party at the end of "Dialogue on the Art of Composition" in comparing it to his other novels (to the statement "You've said almost nothing about The Farewell Party"):

It's built on a formal archetype completely different from that of my other novels. It is absolutely homogeneous, without digressions, on a single subject, narrated at the same tempo throughout, very theatrical, stylized, its structure drawn from farce. (93)

And indeed, upon a preliminary reading of the novel, one sees that the amount of experimentation with narrative techniques is almost non-existent. There are no chapters in The Farewell Party which in any way resemble "The Poet on the Run" and "The Middle-Aged Man" from Life Is Elsewhere.

The novel is included in this study, however, because I have found Kundera to be forgetful of five or six passages in his "homogeneous work which seem to digress completely from the action at hand for the purpose of elucidation and interpretation. True, the metafictional narrator in The Farewell Party may appear to be "quieter" than those narrators in the other four novels. On the other hand, there are moments in this farce during which the narrator presents his own observations which must be examined for a complete study of this technique in Kundera's novels.

Even without the occasional digression, furthermore, the third-person narration in The Farewell Party is decidedly ironic. Bruce Donahue's "Laughter and Ironic Humor in the Fiction of Milan Kundera" even goes so far as to compare the narrative tone in this novel to that of Kundera's second work: "As in Life Is Elsewhere the narrator is coldly ironic and makes the entire situation seem laughable and petty" (72). While Donahue's remark may not be entirely correct, given that the narrative tone in The Farewell Party does not seem to reach to bitterness of voice created in the second novel, the latter half of his statement is well founded. It seems necessary, in any case, that a novel as atypically comic

as Kundera's fourth novel requires the ironic, arguably cynical point of view.

Perhaps this ironic tone and the use of farcical comedy stems from Kundera's acknowledged interest in seventeenth-century French and Spanish literature. Cervantes' Don Quixote and the farces of Moliere, particularly, seem to have a direct influence on The Farewell Party. Kundera's third novel is filled with unlikely coincidences, exaggerated characters, spontaneous romantic couplings, misunderstandings, and exposures. Since most of the action in the novel takes place in a remote spa close to the Czechoslovakian border (presumably the German or Austrian border), there is an indication of the use of the style of allegory present in Don Quixote. (Michael Henry Heim describes the novel as being "set in an artificial, self-enclosed world where life and death are never far from the surface" [World Literature Today 54 - 670].) This clear borrowing of previous literary forms establishes The Farewell Party, then, as being no exception to Kundera's theoretical need for "play" in the novel.

An articulate summary of any complex farce is certainly a weighty task for any scholar. For this chapter, then, an identification of the nine main characters of the novel might be more sufficient:

Ruzena--a nurse at the spa who has recently slept with Klima, a popular trumpet player, during a one-night stand and Franta, a local mechanic. Her recently discovered pregnancy leads her to intimidating Klima into taking responsibility for his unwanted child.

Ruzena's father--a member of the "Citizen's Corps for Civil Order"; a group of elderly men who are currently trying to rid the small spay town of stray dogs with butterfly nets.

Franta--local mechanic. Ruzena's boyfriend who jealously trails the pregnant nurse and tries to persuade her not to have an abortion.

Kamila--Klima's extremely attractive and extremely jealous wife. She follows Klima (presumably from Prague) to the spa town, but loses interest in him when she decides that he has not been unfaithful to her after all.

Klima--trumpet player. A Don Juan figure who lies to both Kamila and Ruzena in desperate fear of a possible scandal. He travels to the spa in order to convince Ruzena to have an abortion.

Dr. Skreta--head physician. A dreamer who secretly injects his own sperm into the wombs of spa patients (the spa is for barren women) in order to carry out his plan to father the future. He is amenable to assisting Klima's plan for Ruzena's abortion.

Bartleff--American businessman. A deeply religious visitor (inexplicably) at the spa who appears to have some sort of divine connection with God and who initiates an emotionally intense sexual encounter with Ruzena on the night before she dies.

Olga--spa patient. The innocent daughter of a tyrannical communist figure who was killed when she was very young. She later became the "ward" of Jakub, a former friend of her father. Olga finally succeeds in seducing Jakub on the same night as the sexual encounter between Bartleff and Ruzena.

Jakub--political figure. Following a long political career, Jakub has stopped at the spa to say goodbye to Dr. Skreta and Olga before he leaves Czechoslovakia forever.

During the course of the novel, five days pass (the novel's five parts) and the characters, in accordance to the form, cross the paths of the others in varying combinations. It is not important to this study to analyze every twist in the story, but the conflict and climax should be noted. On the fourth day of the novel, Jakub places a light blue tablet of poison (given to him years before by Dr. Skreta) into Ruzena's tube of light blue tranquilizers without anyone knowing. On the fifth day of the novel, Ruzena innocently swallows the tablet

of poison and dies. Jakub never learns of her death since he has already left the spa by this time.

As mentioned earlier, the third-person narration to this novel is virtually non-participatory. Kvetoslav Chvatik notes this quality of the point-of-view, stating:

"We have to do with an objective scenic narration with a lot of dialogue, which strictly respects the unity of place and time" (31). The amount of dialogue in The Farewell Party (representational) is much higher than the amount of actual narration (interpretive). As is indicated by the label of "farce," though the characters do not necessarily communicate with each other through spoken language. The misunderstandings seem to be endless and the reader, objectively "watching," is keenly aware of each misinterpretation. This shifting of narratorial attention recalls the narrative "gap" situation in The Joke in that the reader is called upon to make the connections between each character's inability to see the whole situation. Unlike the other four novels, it seems, The Farewell Party and The Joke require almost full cooperation from the reader in order to connect the various threads of plot. Chvatik also states: "Language and the possibility of understanding the other, of grasping the motives behind his actions, remain irreparably split in this bitter comedy without catharsis" (32).

The narrator's voice, hence, is used mainly for the purpose of presenting the basic thoughts and motives of each of the nine characters, usually in ironic tones which seem to be trying to stifle laughter, since the exchange of dialogue between the characters seems to be sufficient for the creation of irony. It would appear, then that Kundera's use of the classical forms of farce eliminates the need for any sort of observational digression.

This form of farce, though, when presented in a late twentieth-century novel, demands the use of the metafictional narrator. Kundera has mentioned the fact that the "lightness of the form" must now be coupled with the "gravity of the question." The depth of the comedy in *The Farewell Party*, then, must reach a more profound level of theme in order to avoid "rewriting Don Quixote"; there is reason behind Chvatik's term "bitter comedy without catharsis." Elizabeth Pochoda's introduction to the novel, moreover, is more articulate in her discussion of this "postmodern farce." She states:

His [Kundera] is a comedy deep enough for tears, for just as the highly serious material of political oppression and surveillance can turn farcical when its consequences are scaled down to the doings of unfaithful husbands and jealous wives, so the farcical matters of paternity suit and fertility clinic can eventually turn back again toward tragedy, or at least toward something approaching it. That these trivial doings should be the matters

on which lives and dignity hang is, when the laughing is done, no laughing matter. (xiii)

I direct the attention of this chapter, then to the list of the nine characters. I have placed Ruzena and Jakub on opposite ends of the list for a distinct purpose: the two characters represent opposite poles in terms of the novel's theme and are the only two characters about whom the "objective" narrator presents any level of digression (with the possible exception of Kamila and Franta, the two "jealous" characters). Ruzena and Jakub are the characters through which Kundera is able to elaborate fully his theme of "control" in this novel.

Elizabeth Pochoda explains this role of "control" in the lives of these characters not only in political terms, but existential terms as well. Ruzena and Jakub are the two thematic extremes who, paradoxically, submit to controlling forces and rise above controlling forces; Jakub's inadvertent "murder" of Ruzena is the ultimate exposition of this theme. Kundera's essayistic digressions hence, are used to fully illuminate this overriding theme.

Ruzena

A variation on this theme of control is the element of paternity. Since Ruzena is unmarried and pregnant,

her only tool of control is manipulation. The nurse's attempts to dominate other characters, particularly Klima, are ironically submissive in that Ruzena has order on her side. She is aware of the fact that Klima's paternal duty is to take responsibility of the situation, so by submitting to an order of justice, her manipulation is relatively passive.

This passivity is outlined through the use of three Ironic Character Observation digressions, characteristically short for this novel, in which Ruzena's role as "inert ruler" is explained. On the evening of the second day, Ruzena is visited by her father (representative of the pettiest of orders with his dog-catching) while she prepares for a meeting with Klima. The narrator states:

Something was happening which Ruzena did not realize: her defiance was imperceptibly, mysteriously merging with her fathers indignation [over the "dog problem"]. She no longer felt such strong distaste for him; on the contrary, she was unconsciously using his angry words as a source of energy. (39)

By inserting this extra-interpretive observation into the framework of the objective telling of the story, the narrator is able to articulate the parallel between the father's love of total order and Ruzena's need for the unwritten laws of paternal justice. And since the two dog-catching scenes in the novel are presented as ironic

and absurd, this drawn parallel qualifies Ruzena's level of control as being both submissive and petty.

Later in the evening, during her discussion with Klima (who is more actively manipulative in convincing Ruzena to have an abortion), the narrator presents the appropriate simile of the chessboard to describe the nurse's passive control:

She felt like a pawn in a game of chess which, having reached the end of the chessboard, has turned into a queen. She savored her unexpected new power. She saw that her call had set into motion all sorts of events: the famous trumpeter left his home to rush to her side, to escort her around in his beautiful car, to make love to her. Clearly, there was a connection between her pregnancy and this sudden power, and giving up the one [through Klima's plan for abortion] might mean forfeiting the other. (48)

Again, through a short Ironic Character Observation digression directed at this "polar extreme" character, the narrator points out the fact that the only action Ruzena had to take was in telephoning Klima to deliver the "good news." After that gesture is completed, Ruzena's level of control becomes inert yet powerful.

"Inert" may indeed be the appropriate adjective to use to describe Ruzena's style of manipulation. Up until the moment when she accidentally takes the poisonous pill, Ruzena vacillates between Klima's plan for abortion and her own plan to use the unborn child as a controlling device (Bertrand Very refers to the latter attitude as "sacralization" in his article on subjectivity in

Kundera's fiction [82]). In order to fully explain Ruzena's motives for declining the abortion, the narrator incorporates yet another observation:

Ruzena . . . became aware that she had only one trustworthy support, only one consolation and salvation: the fruit of her womb. Her whole soul . . . withdrew inward, into the depths of her body, and she became determined never to part from that being peacefully germinating inside her. This being was her secret triumph (139)

Motherhood, then, becomes a metaphor for passive control, as explained to the reader by the digressive narrator. By keeping the baby, presumably for whom she has no other regard, Ruzena houses a powerful yet inert tool of control. Until the baby is aborted, Klima is within the range of the nurse's power. The narrator's observations explain that Ruzena need do little else.

These digressions are admittedly shorter than those examined in *The Joke* and *Life Is Elsewhere*. A longer digression, however, appears within a scene during which some film-makers visit the bathing room of the spa over which Ruzena is supervisor (a small, bureaucratic position similar to that of her father). As the film-makers prepare to record the bathing period of the unattractive naked women for whom Ruzena has expressed a strong distaste, Olga indignantly flees the pool. The naked women shout derisive remarks at Olga, and for the first time, Ruzena joins ranks with the women and

participates in the launching of insults. The scene ends the second chapter of the fourth day/part, but the narrator presents chapter three as an eight-paragraph digression which explains not only the behavior of the women, but also the ironic participation of Ruzena.

Within this third chapter, the narrator asks the reader: "But what about Ruzena? She was neither fat nor old [like the bathing women], in fact she was prettier than Olga [her participation is not, then, from jealousy]. Why then did she feel no sense of solidarity with her?" (one should notice that the use of narratorial questions directed at the reader in The Farewell Party resembles the same technique in The Joke and Life Is Elsewhere). The narrator offers four paragraphs of digressive observation which gives a further illustration of this passive character's controlling device through a Philosophical Exploration digression (final paragraph):

There is no possible compromise between the woman who believes in her uniqueness and her sisters enveloped in the mantle of common femaleness. After a sleepless, brain-racking night, Ruzena firmly placed herself (alas, poor trumpeter) on the side of ageless, universal womanhood. (114)

Thus in a chapter reminiscent of Life Is Elsewhere and foreshadowing the digressions on eroticism in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, the narrator gives a full explanation not only of the comic behavior of the ugly,

naked women (who exhibit a level of control, themselves, over men), but also of Ruzena's characteristic behavior as submissive manipulator.

The identifying remarks on the different characters in The Farewell Party made by Donahue appear to be particularly accurate in terms of Ruzena's character. By stating that Ruzena "makes peace with the system in order to achieve her personal goals and therefore supports the forces of order (the old men catching stray dogs)" (72), Donahue clearly supports Pochoda's theory that the novel's main theme revolves around existential and political control and order. The digressive paragraphs surrounding the character positioned at the most submissive side of the spectrum add further illumination to the theme.

Jakub

If Ruzena is meant to represent submissive and inert control, the political character of Jakub, with his full dominance, appears to be placed on the opposite side of the scale. More closely, Jakub appears to resemble Ludvik Jahn in The Joke with his generally cynical view of life and the circumstances, both political and social, which he finds in Czechoslovakia. This need which Jakub demonstrates appears in its most extreme form through

the pill which Jakub carries. Prior to the first day of the novel, presumably several years prior, Dr. Skreta granted Jakub's request for a tablet of poison which would bring instantaneous death. Jakub has carried the light blue pill with him for the sole purpose of possessing full control of any ultimate forces. With the pill in his possession, Jakub carries with him the power over his own life and circumstances; total control (remarked upon by Pochoda [xii]). Truly, this possession of the fatal pill positions Jakub as the character in The Farewell Party exerting the greatest degree of dominance.

This total dominance, moreover, is the decisive factor in the novel. After an initial confrontation with Ruzena over the dog-catching issue, Jakub, while waiting for Olga in the spa restaurant, casually watches the nurse as she speaks with Klima (Ruzena is, for the most part, a stranger to Jakub). After the potential parents leave the dining hall, Jakub examines the tube of light blue sedatives accidentally left on the table by Ruzena. In a quick, ambiguously motivated moment, Jakub drops his pill into the tube. Ruzena returns to the table and takes the tube of pills from Jakub before he can explain or argue.

The incident lingers in Jakub's mind throughout the rest of the novel. He contemplates not only the very

fact that he placed the pill in the tube, but he also procrastinates telling Ruzena what he has done.

Ultimately, he begins to rationalize the incident and the ensuing procrastination. As mentioned before, Ruzena takes the "sedative" after Jakub has left the spa. Olga and Dr. Skreta suspect, of course, what has happened, but neither of the two characters take any action.

Jakub's action of "murder" and his subsequent philosophical thoughts tie directly into this theme of control through the use of a Philosophical Exploration digression. Kundera even comments upon this incident in the novel in an interview given to Alain Finkielkraut:

Jakub is a sceptic; he knows that those who are persecuted become the persecutors and that it is easy to imagine this role reversal; lyric gestures do not move him; he has seen too much and lived through too much to be able to love people. It's a matter of just a split second when his reason falters, when his unconscious disgust and hatred of people wells up: an innocent young girl dies. (24)

Jakub's temporary "loss of control," hence, invites observation and interpretation from the metafictional narrator. Like the submissive victim, the extremity of Jakub's character demands the more ironic narration through digression.

Prior to the restaurant scene, for instance, the narrator takes advantage of an intense confrontation which occurs between the two paradoxical characters. On the third day/part, Jakub manages to save a bulldog from

the nets of the old men. Ruzena chases after him and orders him to stop. As Jakub tries to push past her, Ruzena recognizes the strong level of irony in his remarks, "that hateful irony which always seemed to be kicking her back where she had come from, where she did not want to stay" (84). Jakub represents the forces of ironic order to which Ruzena has had to submit (and to which she continues to submit) and the two characters exchange glares "of sudden, naked hatred" (84). The following chapter allows the narrator to explain fully through Psychological Observation digression Jakub's feelings towards the forces of absurd order, represented by the old men, and his hatred for this strange girl:

What motivated such people to do their deplorable work? Anger? Certainly. But also the longing for order, a desire to turn the human world into an inorganic one, where everything would function perfectly and work on schedule, subordinated to a suprapersonal system. The longing for order is at the same time a longing for death, because life is an incessant disruption of order. Or to put it the other way around: the desire for order is a virtuous pretext, an excuse for violent misanthropy.

She [Ruzena] represented his eternal downfall. She was pretty, and appeared on the scene not as a persecutor but as a spectator lured by the shoe and identifying with the persecutors. Jakub was always horrified by the readiness of bystanders to rush to the executioner's aid and obligingly help pin down the victim. In the course of time the executioner had grown into a familiar, folksy kind of figure, while the victims still had an unpleasantly aristocratic smell about them. The soul of the crowd, which perhaps had once identified with the poor victim, now identifies with the poor persecutor. In our century, the hunt on human

beings is a hunt on the privileged: those who read books or own dogs. (84-85)

This preliminary confrontation between Ruzena and Jakub, through the metafictional voice's Philosophical Exploration digression, lays down the base for the pivotal murder. By breaking into the representational telling of the story, the narrator is able to explain that Ruzena feels such an immediate hatred for this man whom she has never seen before because his voice and expression represent the forces of order to which she has always been obliged to submit. Further explanation from the intrusive narrative voice allows the reader to see that Jakub's political career (similar to Ludvik Jahn's history) has given him an utter hatred for the pettiness of the masses and a fear of the viciousness of their attitudes. Only through these inserted paragraphs is the narrator able to place clearly the two characters on opposite positions of a scale, a paradox manifested more deeply in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and The Unbearable Lightness of Being.

But after Jakub has placed the poisonous pill in Ruzena's unknowing hands, he becomes preoccupied with the act and its significance. Jakub constantly asks himself why he has done such a thing on this, his last day in Czechoslovakia. Jakub wonders what it all means.

These wonderings allow the narrator to interpret the actions in the story further for the readers understanding. And, in so doing, the narrator comes very close to the level of self-consciousness and self-reference seen in Life Is Elsewhere. On the evening of the fourth day/part, Jakub and Olga attend Klima's concert at the spa. Jakub is relieved to see that Ruzena is still alive as she sits down on their row in the auditorium. As he considers the nurse's livelihood, the narrator takes the opportunity to add another Philosophical Exploration digression:

The unexpected encounter in the restaurant earlier in the day had been a temptation, a trial. It had occurred for the sole purpose of showing him his true self: poisoner of a fellow human being. But the author of this trial (the God in whose existence he did not believe) did not exact a bloody sacrifice, required no innocent blood. The trial would not end in death but in Jakub's self-discovery, in deliverance from sinful moral arrogance. (148)

The brief observation not only clarifies Jakub's thoughts to the reader, but also positions the political character as one who wishes to maintain full control. Jakub does not believe in God (note the self-conscious reference made by the narrator or "author of this trial"), hence he is under no divine control or predestination. But in existentialist terms, the narrator is able to explain that Jakub is realizing that the experience has been an

awakening of sorts; Jakub understands his dominant position of misanthropic aloofness.

Jakub's thoughts and rationalizations persist, however, all the way to the Czech border, and the narrator's ideas move parallel to the action. As he drives away from the spa town, the inevitable reference to the literary character Raskolnikov in Crime and Punishment by Dostoyevsky (Kundera's target) is made. Chapter eighteen of the fifth day of the novel offers the longest digression in order to place Jakub precisely at the top of the "control" ladder:

Yes, there was something about Jakub's act that related him to Raskolnikov: the meaninglessness of the murder, its theoretical quality. But there were differences, too: Raskolnikov was asking whether an outstanding person had the right to sacrifice an inferior existence for the sake of his own advantage. But when Jakub had handed the tube to the nurse, he had had nothing like that in mind. Jakub was not interested in exploring the question of whether one person had the right to sacrifice the life of another. On the contrary, Jakub was convinced that nobody had such a right. (193)

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 Jakub knew that if every person on earth had the power to murder secretly and at long range, humanity would die out within a few minutes. He therefore considered Raskolnikov's experiment totally unnecessary.

. . .
 He tried to test himself by pretending that the nurse was really dead [which she is at this point]. No, this idea failed to fill him with any sense of guilt, and Jakub drove calmly and peacefully through the pleasant countryside which was saying its gentle farewell. (194)

Through this narratorial digression, any equation between Kundera's wholly dominating character and Dostoyevsky's

"superman" is refuted. Kundera's metafictional narrator elaborates upon the underlying theme of the novel by fully discussing the absence of remorse on Jakub's behalf. By incorporating this style of Philosophical Exploration, Kundera also underlines the difference between Dostoyevsky's "realism" and his own postmodern exploration into the theme of control.

This difference in style brings this chapter back to the question of the heritage of farce since Kundera's novelistic forms, in terms of theme, appear to be so far removed from that of Cervantes or Moliere. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of French Literature, for example, describes Moliere's farces as "caricaturing the foibles and vices of everyday domestic, and sometimes political or clerical, life." And in "Dialogue on the Art of Composition," Kundera states as a prelude to his short discussion of The Farewell Party:¹

Yet the early novelists had no such qualms about the improbable. In the first book of Don Quixote, there is a tavern someplace in the middle of Spain where by pure happenstance everybody turns up . . . An accumulation of totally improbably coincidences and encounters. (94)

But at no time in Don Quixote or The Miser, for example, is there a narrator who breaks in to the narrative in order to expound on existential situations. The difference between the themes of the two centuries is too vast for The Farewell Party to be a simple, fun farce

without a depth of digression. Were the range of the nine characters in this novel not so paradoxical, it might be read as a simple rewriting of an eighteenth-century play in contemporary setting. The commentaries on and the very existence of Ruzena and Jakub set The Farewell Party apart drastically from its predecessors.

Pochoda's introduction makes this difference strikingly clear:

Among other things, the final scene in a comedy of manners brings each person's foolishness home to him with the implication that now he may, if he chooses, behave more wisely. In The Farewell Party this moment of illumination and exit does not take place . . . for these people have no exit, least of all from a life of farce. (xiv)

Not one of the nine characters, particularly Ruzena and Jakub, is able to grasp the grip of circumstances, however outrageous, which holds the world so tightly. In the cases of Ruzena and Jakub, the narratorial voice must be used to ensure this difference to the reader through the digressive form.

Note

¹Kundera's apparent love for the French farce is no surprise. For the novel to incorporate "play," as Kundera defines the word, the comedies of the eighteenth century offer The Farewell Party an inexhaustible amount of material.

CHAPTER V

THE BOOK OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING

THE NARRATOR CREATES SEVEN VARIATIONS ON A THEME OF EXISTENCE

Similar to the overriding question which surfaces with Life Is Elsewhere, ("Is this novel a satire?"), Milan Kundera's fourth novel, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting invites the query, "Is this book a novel?" And indeed, upon a first reading of this extraordinary book, extraordinary in that there is nothing in the book which resembles the coherent "stories" in The Joke, Life Is Elsewhere, or The Farewell Party, one wonders what exactly Kundera is trying to do. Two of the more substantial articles dealing with the narratorial structure of the novel, Glen Brand's "Kundera and the Dialectics of Repetition," and David Lodge's excellent "Milan Kundera, and the Idea of the Author in Modern Criticism," moreover, question in explicit terms Kundera's definition of the novel. Lodge states, "It [Laughter and Forgetting] is fragmentary, disjunctive, confused and confusing; it has an improvised air" (116), within his comparison of this fourth novel to The Joke, a novel which the British critic finds to be more richly unified. In focusing upon the eclectic nature of this book, Glen Brand also refers to the loose organization of

the "novel" and the difficult situation facing the critics who have attempted to classify the work within the genre.

The question invites further questions, one of the most immediate being: Why? The Joke, Life Is Elsewhere, The Farewell Party, and even Kundera's collection of seven short stories, Laughable Loves, maintain a certain level of unity, despite the narratorial digressions and the bold-faced, metafictional experimentation seen in the second work. Why would the Czech novelist break away from his earlier styles during the three year period which separates The Farewell Party from Laughter and Forgetting and write such a wildly experimental book?

The relationship between Life Is Elsewhere and Laughter and Forgetting is clear, in any case. With "The Middle-Aged Man" section of the former, Kundera's narration boldly steps out of the story of Jaromil and admits to the reader that the book is, among other things, an actual novel and that Jaromil is fictitious. The dominating "representational" narration is restored after the section completes itself, though, and the story of Jaromil continues into the final section of the novel. It appears that with Laughter and Forgetting, Kundera seeks to write an entire novel based on this flight from the representational mode of story-telling to the openly

interpretive forms of creation. In other words, like "The Middle-Aged Man" section of his second novel, Laughter and Forgetting is a novel in which the meta-fictional narrator dominates throughout the entire book by making the digressions primary and the representational mode of story-telling secondary. I would go so far as to say that the entire book is one long digression on the themes stated in the title.

Returning to the overriding question, however, it is the contention of this chapter and this thesis that the book is indeed a novel, using Kundera's definition of the novel. The question was raised in the afterword of the Penguin edition of the novel which presents an interview with Kundera, conducted by Philip Roth.¹ Kundera responded to his definition of the novel in terms of Laughter and Forgetting:

As far as my own quite personal esthetic judgment goes, it really is a novel, but I have no wish to force this opinion on anyone. There is enormous freedom latent within the novelistic form. It is a mistake to regard a certain stereotyped structure as the inviolable essence of the novel. (232)

On a similar question in the "Dialogue on the Art of Composition" interview in The Art of the Novel, Kundera responds:

And it's this thing (this abstract thing I call the theme) that gives the novel as a whole an internal coherence, the least visible and the most important kind. In The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, the coherence of the whole is created solely by the unity of a few themes (and motifs), which are

developed in variations. Is it a novel? Yes, to my mind. The novel is a meditation on existence as seen through the medium of imaginary characters. (82-83).

These responses return to the main point of this thesis in that Kundera admits to incorporating a playful spirit into this work and to labeling the work a novel because of this playful spirit. Another response in the Roth interview supports this idea: "A novel is a long piece of synthetic prose based on play with invented characters. These are the only limits" (232). The differences between The Farewell Party and Laughter and Forgetting may be considered to be vast, but a close examination of this fourth novel will show that Kundera is consistent in his own definitions and techniques.

What, then, is this structure and this story? As is the situation with The Farewell Party, a complete summary of the novel is not possible. An identification of some of the main contents of each of the seven sections seems to be more in order:

Part One (nineteen chapters)--"Lost Letters": In his forties in 1971, Mirek, a former participant in the putsch of 1948, travels from Prague to a nearby town to obtain some love letters he wrote to Zdena, an unattractive woman, twenty-five years before, during their brief affair. She refuses him this request and upon his return to Prague that afternoon, he and his

seventeen-year-old son by a later marriage are arrested for possessing proscribed political documents.

Part Two (thirteen chapters)--"Mother": Karel and Marketa, a married couple in their thirties, are in an awkward situation because Karel's manipulative and overbearing mother has extended her vacation with them. Her visit will now overlap the visit from their friend Eva, a liberated young woman who occasionally joins the couple for three-way sex. Eva reminds Mother of Nora, a woman Mother knew when Karel was a child. Karel suddenly remembers seeing Nora naked as a child which arouses him greatly and turns the current sexual encounter into a highly successful experience after Mother goes to bed. Unaware of any sexual goings-on, Mother is happy when she retires and when she leaves on the train the next day since she has been able to remember an earlier episode and person in her life. She is also pleased in that the potential embarrassment of forgetting her own life in front of the young people has been avoided.

Part Three (nine chapters)--"The Angels": Michelle and Gabrielle are two American girls who idolize their teacher, Madame Raphael. The lonely teacher assigns an oral report to the girls on Ionesco's play Rhinoceros. The report impresses Madame Raphael to such an extent that she takes the girls' hands and, laughing, dances with them in a circle as they gradually float through the

ceiling of the classroom, leaving the other astonished students below.

Part Four (twenty-three chapters)--"Lost Letters": Tamina, who is in her thirties, lives in an unnamed Western Europe town, and works at a very small rate of pay as a waitress in a cafe. She once fled Czechoslovakia with her older husband who later died. Using what little money she has, Tamina attempts to obtain some love letters and personal journals which she and her husband left behind in Czechoslovakia. Ultimately, Tamina offers her body to Hugo, a patron at the bar, in order to convince him to go to Prague to get the papers. Hugo, however, out of selfishness, finally refuses her request.

Part Five (eighteen chapters)--"Litost": Kristyna, the wife of a butcher and lover of a village mechanic, comes to Prague to visit her other lover, a student, on the night upon which he has been invited to listen to the arguments of some of the finest poets in the country. The student is embarrassed by Kristyna because of her provinciality and is frustrated with her because she will not allow him to have sexual intercourse with her. Leaving her behind in his attic apartment, the student goes to the meeting where he discovers through the words of the poets that he is lucky to have such a unique woman. Their sex-play upon his return to the apartment

is better than usual; however, Kristyna still refuses entry (a pregnancy would kill her). The next morning, following Kristyna's departure, the student is left in a state of misery and frustration.

Part Six (twenty-nine chapters)--"The Angels": A young man invites Tamina to a land with no memory. He drives her to a row boat where an eleven-year-old boy takes her to an island inhabited by children (all, presumably, between the ages of seven and twelve). The children accept Tamina into their childish world, but eventually reject her on the basis of the difference between their unformed bodies and her fully developed body. After sustaining several physical assaults, Tamina attempts to swim away from the island. The endeavor does not succeed, and she drowns.

Part Seven (fourteen chapters)--"The Border": Jan, a forty-five-year-old exile from Czechoslovakia, is currently romantically involved with Edwige in an unnamed town in West Europe. He is preparing to leave the country for America. Jan argues with Edwige and his other sexually liberated friends about male/female relationships in between "organized" orgies and the funeral of a mutual friend, Passer. The section and the novel end with Jan and Edwige standing on a nude beach. Jan is repulsed by the mass nudity, while Edwige finds the experience to be liberating.

While these synopses provide an indication of the types of characters, story-lines, settings, and discontinuities featured in the novel, they do not show in any way the level of narratorial experimentation involved. Even when the narrator does not inform the reader that the characters are fictional and only created for the purpose of illuminating the themes involved, it is clear to the reader through the use of periodic digressions, as is the case with the characters and situations in Life Is Elsewhere and The Farewell Party, that the representational aspects of the novel are entirely imaginary. A glance at the amount of digression in each of the seven parts will show the subordination of any fictionality in Laughter and Forgetting to the dominant level of narratorial voice:

Part One--The narrator incorporates a Phenomenological Discussion digression about the Czech leaders, Gottwald and Clementis, in February, 1948, a Definition Digression on the "idyll" and its opposition, and a Philosophic Exploration digression on the "fugue" of Russia as opposed to the "fugue" of Czechoslovakia.

Part Three--The narrator recalls his job as a horoscope writer after the Russian Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 through an Autobiographical Digression (a digression type which is unique to Kundera's other

novels), a Definition Digression on diabolical laughter and angelic laughter, an Autobiographical Digression on his ostracism after the Communist putsch of 1948, and a short Phenomenological Discussion digression on a feminist novel.

Part Four--The narrator discusses graphomania through a Definition/Philosophic Exploration digression and his reasons for creating the character of Tamina through a bold Metafictional Statement digression.

Part Five--The narrator defines the word "Litost" for the reader and explains how he is able to see the meeting of the poets all the way from his home in Rennes, France. The divisions of this section are not numbered but are titled with questions and headlines. As is obvious, the section operates as one long Definition Digression, but includes the Phenomenological Discussion digression type (note the similarities between the use of the poets in this section and in "The Poet on the Run" section of Life Is Elsewhere) and the Metafictional Statement digression type.

Part Six--The narrator discusses the creation of the novel Laughter and Forgetting, why Tamina is the protagonist of the novel, and his own relationship with his father, a musician through Metafictional Statement digressions and Autobiographical Digressions. The account of Tamina's experiences on the island is told in

an oneiric style similar to the "Xavier" section of Life Is Elsewhere.

Part Seven--The narrator explains the significance of the blackbird of Europe, his creation of the character of Jan, and the significance of the epic poem "Daphnis and Chloe" through Metafictional Statement digressions and Philosophical Exploration digressions.

Part Two, "Mother," seems to be the only section of the novel which is not centered around some form of digression. Despite the high degree of representational narration, though, digressions still appear within the section in order to explain the significance of the section to the whole novel. Within the other six sections of the novel, however, the narrator digresses for an entire chapter, thus turning the whole section into a novelistic essay. These chapters, moreover, usually begin or end an entire section of the novel, in order to establish the subordination of the fictional aspects of the novel to the overriding exploratory existential questions.

Again, I do not intend to show an evolutionary pattern to Kundera's novels, nor do I wish to show the difference between his first three works and his fourth and fifth novels in this thesis (though there may be some significance to the fact that the novelist originally

intended The Farewell Party to be his last novel² and the fact that Laughter and Forgetting was his first novel written in exile). The structure of the novel, however, bears a strong resemblance to Laughable Loves in that the seven parts of the novel resemble seven different short stories. Kundera states:

Laughable Loves began as ten stories. When I was putting it in final form, I eliminated three of them and the whole thing became very coherent, in a way that prefigured The Book of Laughter and Forgetting: the same themes . . . make a single entity out of seven narratives (Art 85)

The major difference between the two works, though, is the fact that Laughable Loves, despite any common themes connecting the seven stories, is an anthology limited to the genre of short fiction. The "Dialogue on the Art of Composition," interview, on the other hand, asks Kundera why he did not create seven different novels out of Laughter and Forgetting. Kundera states: "But if I had written seven separate novels, I'd have no hope of 'encompassing the complexity of existence in the modern world' in one single book" (72). Laughter and Forgetting, then, is a novel which depends upon the element of play and digression in order to analyze these existential questions. The novel may appear to be one long digression in itself, but without this high level of control, the seven individual stories and cast of

characters would simply exist in the form of a repetition of Kundera's earlier anthology.

With this structure and subordination, Kundera's narrative voice is presented in a completely different light than that of the previous three novels. If Laughter and Forgetting is a novel wherein the "coherence of the whole is created solely by the unity of a few themes," Kundera cannot use the first-person narrative style from The Joke, nor can he restrict himself to the limited amounts of narratorial digressions seen in The Farewell Party. He must make clear to the reader, through the overriding presence introduced in the sixth section of Life Is Elsewhere, that he, Milan Kundera, is the face behind all masks, thus inviting commentary. Peter Kussi's "Dialogues with Fiction" notices the change in authorial stance between the third and fourth novel by focusing some of his statements on the intensification of the narrator's pessimism and irony (209). Kussi's remarks seem to clarify the tone of the narratorial voice of this novel, but Ann Stewart Caldwell's study of the intrusive narrative voice is a bit more analytical in that she recognizes the implications of a novelist's self incorporation into literature (as will be discussed, Kundera even places his own name within the text). Caldwell states, "The narrator's voice heard through-out the novel is that of Kundera narrating some ten years

after the events of the story he tells. The persona, on the other hand, is quite another Kundera . . ."; she follows this statement with:

. . . his omniscient "I" looks objectively at his own past, at the immediate past of his nation, and, through his fictional characters, at the present situation of mankind. He achieves an ironic perspective within the novel by contrasting characters and situations and by his own comments to the reader, which both contradict and enlarge upon the thoughts and actions of his protagonists, including those of his own persona (51)

From Caldwell's statements, we are to understand that Kundera's self-incorporation into his novels as both narrator and persona is a full and open statement upon his role as the creator of the work. Furthermore, by remarking upon real, past events in his own life and making references to his feelings at that time, Kundera is able to show the relevance of his own experiences to the themes of the novel and to establish his own past through memory along with the histories of his characters.³

It seems pointless to establish the themes of *Laughter and Forgetting* when Kundera tells us through the title of the novel what the book covers. Even two of the titles of the book's sections explain their own subject matter: "Litost" and "The Border." It is as if the themes of the work are presented to the reader ready-made

and prepared for discussion and example. Kundera comments on this foregrounding of theme in the novel:

A theme is an existential inquiry. And increasingly I realize that such an inquiry is, finally, the examination of certain words, theme-words. Which leads me to emphasize: A novel is based primarily on certain fundamental words. It is like Schoenberg's "tone-row." In The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, the "row" goes: forgetting, laughter, angels, litost, border. Over the course of the novel, those five principal words are analyzed, studied, defined, redefined, and thus transformed into categories of existence. The novel is built on those few categories the way a house is built on its pillars. (84)

And indeed, the words are analyzed and discussed in such a way that the reader is able not only to understand the definition of each word, but also to make sense of the word in existential, quasi-philosophical terms.

Laughter

As Glen Brand's article indicates, the two types of laughter discussed throughout the novel are actually dialectics of repetition. "One pole of the dialectic is based on stability and identity which is unaffected and strengthened by repetition; the other pole emphasizes the discrepancy between the 'repetition' and the 'original' and reveals the instability of truth and of any essence on which identity is based" (461). In short, the two types of laughter discussed in the novel represent two types of repetition. "Angelic" laughter bases itself on utopian, youthful values which deny individuality.

Borrowing heavily from Nietzsche's theory of eternal return (= meaninglessness and absurdity), this form of laughter is an indication of utter delight and joy which sees no wrong, possesses no memory of past imperfection, and delights in its own power and existence, however false or self-deluding that existence that may be.

"Diabolical" laughter, on the other hand, is the derisive, ironic laughter which is directed towards the laughter of the angels. Haunted by memories of past failures and personalized lifestyles, those who are not captured by angelic laughter are equipped only with the power to see through the falseness of that "optimism."

These two forms of laughter are the focal points of the two "Angel" chapters of the novel (parts three and six). Kundera's narratorial voice presents situations, real and fictitious, historical and autobiographical, as digressions to his overall discussion. As mentioned before, all "literary" elements subordinate to the key theme that is discussed. The examples provided in this chapter, hence, are unlike those in chapters two through four of this thesis in that digressions for Laughter and Forgetting are actual stories. Milan Kundera's voice is now the heart of the matter.

Chapter two of part three of the novel presents the first full discussion of the angelic form of laughter

through a Definition Digression so that the reader can understand the representational text of the teacher and the two students (each of the three women appropriately named after angels).⁴ Milan Kundera, narrator, explains:

You are no doubt familiar with the scene in B movies in which a boy and a girl are running through a spring (or summer) landscape holding hands. Running, running, running, and laughing. By laughing the lovers are telling the whole world, all movie audiences everywhere, "See how happy we are, how glad to be alive, how perfectly attuned to the great chain of being!" It is a silly scene, a kitschy scene, but it does contain one of the most basic human situations: "serious laughter, laughter beyond joking." (58)

Not only does Kundera explain what the laughter is; essentially, he is also able to comment upon this form of laughter in an almost derisive fashion by referring to it as "kitschy" and "silly." Kundera looks through the joy of the two lovers in order to point out its falseness.

In chapter four of the same section, Kundera as narrator is able to elaborate further upon this concept by introducing his theory of the Devil's laughter:

Angels are partisans not of Good, but of divine creation. The Devil, on the other hand, denies all rational meaning to God's world. World domination, as everyone knows, is divided between demons and angels. But the good of the world does not require the latter to gain precedence over the former (as I thought when I was young): all it needs is a certain equilibrium of power. If there is too much uncontested meaning on earth (the reign of angels), man collapses under the burden; if the world loses all its meaning (the reign of the demons), life is every bit as impossible. (61)

Again, that Kundera is able to comment upon these two forms and that he mentions his former participation in the laughter of angels establishes the first theme of the novel for the reader and indicates his current position amongst the diabolical scheme of laughter through the Definition Digression and the Autobiographical Digression.

Blended into these explorations of the theme are the "digressionary" stories. Other than the fictional tale of the teacher and two students, Kundera inserts, for instance, an autobiographical reference to the period after the Prague Spring when he worked for a Communist newspaper writing horoscopes under a pseudonym until he was discovered and fired. The most powerful of the images in this section of the novel, however, is Kundera's discussion of a time in which he danced in a ring with other writers and poets following the 1948 putsch. His references to his "fall" from that circle clearly establish his irony as being diabolical rather than angelic: "Then one day I said something I would better have left unsaid. I was expelled from the Party and had to leave the circle" (65). It is in this chapter (6) that Kundera presents a digression upon the theory of the circle, thus giving further observations to the reader on the nature of eternal, meaningless return and

the laughter of angels and Communist regimes through a series of Philosophic Exploration digressions:

That is when [leaving the circle] I became aware of the magic qualities of the circle. Leave a row and you can always go back to it. The row is an open formation. But once a circle closes, there is no return. (65)

Kundera's reference to his own role in the 1948 putsch and his dismissal from the ring of "believers," as established by Caldwell, places his narratorial voice on the ironic side of the dialectic. The fact that he features his own persona and experiences amongst chapters about fictional characters through Autobiographical Digressions only adds to the immediacy and necessity of the existential exploration and thematic definition.

But the entire novel cannot be made up of autobiographical writings. Kundera must create a character in order to say completely what only a novel can say about the two forms of laughter. For this purpose, Kundera creates a character named Tamina before the reader's eyes:

According to my calculations there are two or three new fictional characters baptized on earth every second. As a result, I am always unsure of myself when it comes time for me to enter that vast crowd of John the Baptists. But what can I do? I have to call my characters something, don't I? Well, this time, just to make it clear my heroine belongs to me and me alone (and means more to me than anyone ever has), I am giving her a name no woman has ever had before: Tamina. I picture her as tall and beautiful, thirty-three, and a native of Prague. (79)

.
 [The Book of Laughter and Forgetting] is a novel about Tamina, and whenever Tamina is absent, it is a novel for Tamina. She is its main character and main audience, and all the other stories are variations on her story and come together in her life as in a mirror. (165)

The themes to be discussed in Laughter and Forgetting are far too complex to be discussed within the limits of autobiographical narrative, and Kundera has made it clear that he does not wish to write straightforward philosophy. By creating the character of Tamina right before our eyes in a way that moves much further than the meta-fictional creation of Jaromil and Maman, Kundera's novel becomes a book which makes certain the subordination of characters and fictional elements to larger existential questions.

Part six of the novel, the second "Angels" section, takes Tamina into the text again in order to demonstrate fully the power of the laughter of angels.⁵ Using the "oeneric" mode of narrative for the third time, Kundera's narrator presents Tamina's voyage to the island of children as a full elaboration of the difference between joyful laughter and ironic laughter, memory and forgetting (yet to be discussed). Bearing some resemblance to the conditioned children in Huxley's Brave New World, the children on the island have no memories and delight in their day-to-day play. They dance to rock music (like angels in a circle) and have no choice but to look upon

Tamina as a stranger and intruder since she does have memories, breasts, and pubic hair. Tamina fears them and fears their power. The fact that she drowns in her attempt to flee the island is no coincidence in that her attempt to enter the childish circle (she journeys to the island by choice, at the young man's invitation) results in rejection and fall. Tamina's story is Kundera's story and her creation in the novel through a Metafictional Statement digression almost takes the exact place of Kundera's persona.

Even so, Kundera's narrator combines recollections of his own father's death with the tale of the island. By incorporating this Autobiographical Digression, he is able to draw the necessary, visible parallel for the reader's comprehension between the dangers of angelic laughter and the precariousness of the person who possesses the devil's ironic laugh. The narrator begins chapter thirteen of this section in the following manner:

Why is Tamina on a children's island? Why is that where I imagine her?

I don't know.

Maybe it's because on the day my father died the air was full of children's voices.

I pointed out the window and said, "Hear that? What a joke! Husak is being named an Honorary Pioneer!"

And Father began to laugh. He laughed to let me know that his brain was alive and I could go on talking and joking with him. (173-4)

The digression explains the devotion of children to the

communist party and their naming of Husak, communist leader, as their leader. But by doing so, Kundera's narratorial, "playful" device compares the real, remembered situation with the fictitious situation in order to establish, once more, the definition of the laughter of angels (childish, self-deluding) and the laughter of demons (aging, remembering, sarcastically laughing). This cross-referencing of themes, allow me to emphasize, is achieved only through the use of the novelistic digression, Kundera's most powerful technique.

Since Kundera's narrator is able to comment upon the laughter of self-delusion is not sufficient, however; he must also explain his situation in Nietzschean terms. If the laughter of angels is a laughter of eternal repetition, a circle of optimism and celebration of joy without derisive questioning or humor, Laughter and Forgetting cannot offer an answer to the existential question. Answers fall in the realm of self-delusion and complacency, as Kundera has explained. Explorations of questions through variations of the theme within the ironic perspective of narration offers the reader a release from the absurdity of the eternal return.

Referring to the chapter in part three of the novel in which Kundera discusses his "fall" from the circle of writers to the level of diabolical laughter, David Lodge

focuses on the unification of the entire novel which is a result of the variations occurring within the seven dependent sections of the novel. For Lodge, the Definition Digressions in which Kundera explains the underlying theme are the forces which pull the seven disparate parts into a whole:

It [the passage] brings together, with devastating rhetorical force, bits of information and symbolic motifs that have been previously introduced into the text with deceptive casualness. It is this periodic convergence of diverse and apparently disparate discourses that gives The Book of Laughter and Forgetting its unity. (119)

Kundera, then, cannot write a novel on the theme of laughter and repetition if that novel falls into the category of the overly optimistic novel (i.e., a novel which offers a complete and final answer to an existential query in the way that angelic laughter offers a paradisaical solution). Seven parts or stories which each offer a self-satisfied answer to the existential query would be self-refutation. In discussing Thomas Pynchon's novel V., for instance, Tony Tanner expresses his admiration for the book's refusal to offer a finalized, hence a forgettable, answer to the novel's puzzle.⁶ Variations on the same theme, though, each exploring a new direction for the two dialectic poles, is more in line with Kundera's concept of an exploratory novel.

As mentioned before, by incorporating the account of the death of his father through an Autobiographical Digression, Kundera is also able to elaborate upon what his novel is doing in between the chapters when he digresses to tell the story of Tamina. Kundera's narrator draws an analogy amongst what his novel is trying to do, why Tamina decides to accept the invitation of the young man, and what Beethoven's intentions were for variation in music:

The variation form is the form of maximum concentration. It enables the composer to limit himself to the matter at hand, to go straight to the heart of it. The subject matter is the theme, which often consists of no more than sixteen measures. Beethoven goes as deeply into those sixteen measures as if he had gone down a mine to the bowels of the earth. (164)

. . .

Man knows he cannot embrace the universe with all its suns and stars. But he finds it unbearable to be condemned to lose the second infinity as well, the one so close, so nearly within reach. Tamina lost the infinity of her love, I lost my father, we all lose in whatever we do, because if it is perfection we are after, we must go to the heart of the matter, and we can never quite reach it. (165)

. . .

This entire book is a novel in the form of variations. The individual parts follow each other like individual stretches of a journey leading toward a theme, a thought, a single situation, the sense of which fades into the distance. (165)

Within the text of the novel itself, Kundera explains to the reader that his novel is not a piece of propaganda (despite the high political content and the fact that the communist regime appears to be the highest example of the angelic circle) which offers one clear answer to

everything, but an exploration of alternatives to the misery and danger of the non-questioning circle of optimism.

Memory, Graphomania, Litost, Border

Running parallel to the theme of laughter, the theme of forgetting, more nearly a supporting rather than a dominating theme, falls into a dialectic category. Parts one, two, and four, especially, present Philosophic Exploration digressions and Phenomenological Discussion digressions to illustrate the theme of forgetting in terms of how it is another side of the angel/devil laughter concept. The opposition between Tamina and the children on the island, for instance, is the ironic juxtaposition between the individual who has memories and the faceless mass who have none. Tamina, the digressions explain, possessing a sometimes happy, often melancholy past, is not capable of the mindless happiness offered to her by the "innocent" children. She can only look upon this civilization in irony (though she cannot laugh) since her mind is full of memories of the 1968 Russian invasion. The children, on the other hand, possess only one form of laughter: the joy of living and playing. They, like the Pioneer Society children who award Husak, their leader, the title of Honorary Pioneer, have only optimism and blind determination for their happy society.

Kundera makes the similarity between angel laughter and forgetting and devil laughter and remembering sufficiently clear to the reader through digressions, what Lodge implies to be the key unifying tool of the novel.

Bruce Donahue's article explains this theme in the clearest terms:

For those who are convinced they are right, the past becomes something to be shaped according to the ideals of the future; consequently, the past is distorted for an ideological purpose - for Kundera, this is forgetting the past. Similarly, if the past has no meaning for the present - and this is not the same as the past being irrational or a joke - then it can be forgotten without loss. (73)

The implications of the concept of forgetting, then, for those who celebrate the laughter of angels exclusively, are far-reaching in that forgetting, for the totalitarian state, can mean the alteration of history. Touching on one of the main themes of Orwell's 1984 (in an entirely different manner, though), Kundera's narrator discusses the occurrence of this deliberation of forgetting as a Philosophic Exploration digression to illuminate the theme.

Chapter seventeen of part one presents the character of Mirek to the reader, a man who is trying desperately to take hold of old love letters in order to erase the past and thus erase that which he looks back upon in embarrassment. As mentioned before, Kundera's narrator incorporates a short Phenomenological Discussion

digression of the airbrushing of the photograph of Gottwald and Clementis for further illustration.

Yet both stories are presented to illuminate the theme of forgetting which Kundera presents in the following digressive paragraph:

Mirek is as much a rewriter of history as the communist Party, all political parties, all nations, all men. People are always shouting they want to create a better future. It's not true. The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past. They are fighting for access to the laboratories where photographs are retouched and biographies and histories rewritten. (22)

With this thematic explanation, Kundera's narrator makes the situation clear to the reader: Mirek is just like the communist Party even though Mirek's intentions are based on a more personal, apolitical level. By erasing the past, both Mirek and the communist Party are able to control the future (almost an exact line from Orwell's slogan, yet presented differently). "Mother" uses the same theme but in a more erotic framework: Karel's spontaneous memories of Nora bring about a sudden and satisfying change in attitude towards Marketa, the troubled wife.⁷ Tamina's attempts to retrieve the lost letters from Prague, likewise, make clear the need to reclaim the past in order to establish a more satisfying present; Tamina's miserable present as the underpaid

waitress in the cafe can be relieved by a memory of the husband from the past. In the Philip Roth interview, Kundera commented upon this topic:

Take the other theme of the book, forgetting. This is the great private problem of man: death as the loss of the self. But what is this self? It is the sum of everything we remember. Thus, what terrifies us about death is not the loss of the future but the loss of the past. Forgetting is a form of death ever present within life. This is the problem of my heroine, in desperately trying to preserve the vanishing memories of her beloved dead husband. (234-5)

Tamina, Karel, and Mirek are all representative actors for this theme of forgetting which runs parallel to laughter. Forgetting and forced loss of memory are as much a danger to the individual self as the ever-denying circle of angelic laughter. Memory and a past enable the individual, the digressions of the novel tell us, to see through falsehood with the smile of irony.

The letters, on the other hand, develop the theme of memory, past, and future through Kundera's Philosophic Exploration digressions/Autobiographical Digressions on graphomania, seen primarily in Part Four of the novel. At the end of chapter eight of this section of the novel, Tamina is serving drinks, as usual, to the solipsistic group of individuals who frequent the bar. Chapter nine, however, begins with the following two sentences: "You are hereby excused from the lecture the two Socrateses gave the young woman on the art of writing. I want to

talk about something else instead" (91), thus beginning a discussion on the theme of graphomania, a definition of the word, a few personal experiences with the concept, and a relating of how the word ties in with the theme of forgetting.

If memory can be recorded on paper, then graphomania is a symptom of one who feels isolated to such an extent that the concept of writing becomes an obsession, one infers from Kundera. The chapter relates, for instance, a personal experience Kundera had with a Parisian cab driver who suffered from acute insomnia and wrote compulsively about his experiences in World War II. "Graphomania," Kundera tells us, is "an obsession with writing books."

But the effect transmits a kind of flashback to the cause. If general isolation causes graphomania, mass graphomania itself reinforces and aggravates the feeling of general isolation. The invention of printing originally promoted mutual understanding. In the era of graphomania the writing of books has the opposite effect: everyone surrounds himself with his own writings as with a wall of mirrors cutting off all voices from without. (92)

The short, illuminating chapter is an explanation of the attitudes of the characters which Kundera has consciously created for the purpose of further examination of the theme of the two sides of laughter.

Yet the graphomania Definition Digression also relates to Kundera's stance as novelist, as Caldwell explains. If graphomania is the condition which affects

isolated people who are longing to retain memories, how does Kundera account for the fact that the chapter appears within a novel which he, himself, is writing? The cabdriver and Bibi, Tamina's friend who wishes to write a novel, are preoccupied with events in their own life, yet Kundera incorporates what some might find to be some highly personal events in his own life into Laughter and Forgetting (the horoscope job, his fall from the circle, the death of his father, etc.). Caldwell states, however, that "the years of reflection and of trying to tell his own very personal drama in other works of fiction have given Kundera the ironic perspective on his own fictional persona" (51). The fact that Kundera is remembering these events only reinforces his own need to look back upon past times in order to relate those experiences to the thematic framework of the entire novel.

Going back to the difference between the dialectic opposition of angelic and demonic laughter, though, Kundera's variations also approach the condition which falls between the two sides with his fifth and seventh section of the novel, "Litost," and "The Border." What then is the condition which affects the person who has fallen from the circle of angels and can only look upon life with irony? How do you define the difference

between the two? The narrator of Laughter and Forgetting explores these two questions of existence, using several of the digression types, to further illuminate the overall theme.

The frustrations of the student's relationship with Kristyna in Part Five, for example, are explained to the reader, through a Definition Digression, as being the condition of "litost," in the chapter bearing the title, "What is Litost?" (again, notice the question-asking device which is employed in the three previously-discussed novels):

Litost is a Czech word with no exact translation into any other language. It designates a feeling as infinite as an open accordian, a feeling that is the synthesis of many others: grief, sympathy, remorse, and an indefinable longing. The first syllable, which is long and stressed, sounds like the wail of an abandoned dog. (121)

Once one has fallen from the realm of the happiness which the angels celebrate, looking back upon the situation can only bring about this condition. The student feels shut out of Kristyna's life because she is a better swimmer than he, because she will have sexual intercourse with her butcher husband and mechanic lover, but not with him, and because she is a happy woman who is blind to any depth of cynicism. He, appropriate to the usual persona of the student in literature, is depressed and frustrated most of the time over the human condition. The student

is one side of the spectrum who looks over to the other side with an expression of gloom.

Such an illumination of theme is not enough for this novel, however, so Kundera adds several levels to the exploration of this theme through a device which resembles the Phenomenological Discussion digressions explored in Life Is Elsewhere. The group of poets, for example, contains one character who is parallel to the student's condition: Boccaccio (as Kundera names him). The narrator reveals the situation:

But along with Verlaine, Yesenin, and several others not particularly worth mentioning, there is a man who must be there by mistake. It is absolutely plain . . . that the muse of poetry has never yet bestowed her favors on him, that he does not even care for verse. His name is Boccaccio. (129)

While the other poets speak of love, romantic ideals, and other "high" matters which the reader understands to be associated with the "circle" motif of the theme of angelic laughter, Boccaccio can only speak derisively and cynically about their work, counteracting their high ideals with ironic, diabolical laughter. Because the student has never been able to obtain this high degree of love, the "litostic" condition seems to pervade both characters. They, like Kundera, have fallen from the circle.

Yet, again, Kundera's self-incorporation into this section of the novel is another personal example of how

he experiences the same condition. The narration in this particular section adds another dimension to the thematic framework. He tells us exactly where he is and what he is doing upon the evening of the meeting of the poets: "I watch them from a distance of two thousand kilometers. It is now the autumn of 1977" (128). Although Kundera's narrator could not see for such a great distance (he is in Rennes, Kundera's first residence after his departure from Czechoslovakia), he explains that the tear in his eye magnifies the scene for him. Such an Autobiographical Digression classifies Kundera as yet another victim of the condition of *litost*, the longing condition which looks back across the gap which runs between that which is idealized (love, poetry) and that which is realized (the inability to achieve those things).

The final section of the novel, though, is the point at which Kundera's narrator attempts to explore what might seem to the reader to be an unexplorable phenomenon: the line which is drawn between the two dialectic poles. Part analysis of the line and part recollection of the "litost" chapter, "The Border" is an attempt on the novelist's part to focus upon the division between serious humor and ironic laughter through Philosophic Exploration and Metafictional Statement digression. Using the character of Jan in a town which, presumably, is similar to Tamina's Western Europe town,

Kundera creates the fictional character in order to analyze the concept through a variety of episodes.

Jan, Kundera's narrator tells us, is preparing to leave for America. Yet the geographical border which he is to cross will have connotations of a metaphysical border as well:

What border is that?

The woman he had loved most in the world . . . used to tell him . . . that her life was hanging by a thread. Oh yes, she wanted to live, she loved life; but she also knew that her "I want to live" was spun from the threads of a cobweb. It takes so little, so infinitely little, for a person to cross the border beyond which everything loses meaning: love, convictions, faith, history. Human life - and herein lies its secret - takes place in the immediate proximity of that border, even in direct contact with it; it is not miles away, but a fraction of an inch. (206-7)

Thus the narrator explains through a digression which is part Philosophic Exploration, part Definition, why Jan contemplates his current encounters in such a cynical, ironic fashion, but the non-textual Kundera gives further explanation of the phenomenon in the interview with Philip Roth:

There is a certain imaginary dividing line beyond which things appear senseless and ridiculous Man lives in close proximity to this boundary, and can easily find himself on the other side. That boundary exists everywhere, in all areas of human life and even in the deepest, most biological of all: sexuality. And precisely because it is the deepest region of life the question posed to sexuality is the deepest question. This is why my book of variations can end with no variation but this. (236-7)

Kundera's statement, as is obvious, is comparable to the

dominating digressions throughout this section and this book, but it does contribute some insight to this aspect of the dialectic poles of the novel. Sexuality (and death) are used within the representational story-telling of this last chapter in order to strengthen this theme in that Jan faces situations in which "living" in general appears to be sensible, enjoyable, endurable; maintaining a certain level of meaning, yet is unable to stop thinking about the other side of this apparent truth. Jan contemplates the other side of these appearances in terms of the utter absurdity of the situations and the longing to laugh at them. It is through these situations, then, that Kundera manages to convey his final theme and aspect of the two forms of laughter.

Two key scenes appear at the end of this section in which the dividing line is analyzed through the heaviest amount of scrutiny. In chapter twelve of this section, Jan and his acquaintances have gathered for the funeral of Passer, another group member. Absorbed in his scripture reading, the orator does not notice that a hat has accidentally blown onto the lid of the coffin. The attendants know that they are supposed to be sober and humorless, but the irony of the hat on the coffin is unbearable. They can barely hold back their laughter for that "fraction of an inch." In chapter thirteen of the section, Barbara, a sexually liberated member of the

group plays hostess to one of her many scheduled orgies. As she rushes about the couples, dictating their moves, their gestures, their caresses, Jan and another guest are unable to control their mirth. They are both old enough to understand the "adultishness" and "seriousness" of sexuality, but Barbara's formulizing of the situation and her "queenlike" control force the two men to recognize the other side of the question. They cannot help but to cross the border and laugh ironically at the situation.

Although the border is not as consciously created by Kundera's commanding voice as the sections of the novel involving Tamina, the reader is highly aware of the fact that, because the narrator has explained that the novel is a variation on some themes, Jan and his group of acquaintances are merely presented to illustrate the theme of the border under the motif of sexuality. Yet another aspect of the two sides of laughter is explained as the variations on the theme come to an end.

Herbert Eagle's thorough study of this novel, "Genre and Paradigm in Milan Kundera's The Book of Laughter and Forgetting," which focuses on every "form" of narrative as it is presented in every section of the novel, concludes the following: "If there is a dominant genre in Laughter and Forgetting, one which organizes and situates all the others, it is the essay" (252). A study of the essays in this novel, which are composed of the

different digression types and employed throughout each variation, proves the critic to be correct.

Memory/Forgetting, coupled with the higher theme, demonic laughter/angelic laughter, is the heart of Kundera's fourth novel. It is the organizing agent which creates every character, every situation, and every nuance within the text. After three novels of digressions from the representational modes of narrative, Kundera allows the digressions themselves to be the highest priority for the first time in his career. With The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Kundera's fifth and latest novel, however, the interpretive digressions and the representational fictionality reach a happy medium.

Notes

¹I use the Penguin edition of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting (Trans. Michael Henry Heim, Writers from the Other Europe Series. General Editor, Philip Roth. New York, 1981) since it includes this relevant interview. The Joke, Laughable Loves, Life Is Elsewhere, and The Farewell Party are also included in the series, possessing, hence, important supplementary information on Kundera and his literature.

²The Introduction to Glen Brand's bibliography on Milan Kundera mentions, among other items of information on The Farewell Party, that the novel was the last work of prose fiction written by the Czech novelist in Prague and that Kundera intended to conclude his literary career with the work (xxii).

³Caldwell's statements draw an immediate allusion to Wayne Booth's ideas of the "implied author" in The Rhetoric of Fiction. Booth states, "As he [an author] writes, he creates not simply an ideal, impersonal 'man in general' but an implied version of 'himself' that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's works" (70-71). The scholar continues, "However impersonal he [an author] may try to be, his reader will inevitably construct a picture of the official scribe who writes in this manner--and of course that official scribe will never be neutral toward all values" (71).

⁴Laura L. Brennan's short but informative "The Iconography of Angels in Kundera's Book of Laughter and Forgetting" offers a succinct explanation for the angelic names of the teacher and the two American students.

⁵The use of Tamina's character in two sections of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting draws another similarity between the novel and Laughable Loves, the collection of short stories. Dr. Havel, like Tamina, inexplicably appears in two of the "sections" of the book.

⁶Tanner's book Thomas Pynchon contains a chapter on V. (40-55).

⁷Section two and section seven, incidentally, offer some of the more comic effects of the themes of laughter and forgetting. In "Mother," Mother walks right into the sexplay of the three young adults to tell them that she has remembered (finally) the poem she was asked to recite in school so many years ago. Oblivious to the two

scantily-clad women and her complacent son, Mother proudly recites the poem by heart. "The Border," too, analyzes the moment in which a "serious" mindset gives way to a "humorous" mindset by employing an episode about a "staged" orgy.

CHAPTER VI

THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING:
THE NARRATOR PSYCHOANALYZES A SURGEON,
A PHOTOGRAPHER, AN ARTIST,
AND A PROFESSOR TO EXPLORE
NIETZSCHE, VERTIGO, BETRAYAL, AND SHIT

With Kundera's fifth and most recent novel, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, the Czech novelist's style of narration reaches a reconciliation of the "representational" and the "interpretive" modes of storytelling for what seems to be the first time in his writing career. The Joke, for example, buries the two forms within its multiperspective narrative style. Life Is Elsewhere carries the experimentation one step further with the "omniscient" narrator's occasional digressions about the two main characters (as is the case with The Farewell Party) and his open experimentation. The Book of Laughter and Forgetting places the interpretive mode of story-telling as the top priority of the novel, thus making the fictionality of the text subordinate to the overlying themes. Unbearable Lightness, on the other hand, is the reader's first awareness that Kundera has found a medium between the two modes, a novel which explores a philosophical question yet provides a level of

fictionality to the exploration so as to preclude any level of subordination between the two.

This level of fictionality is seen predominantly within the presentation of the four principle characters of the novel. Unlike the non-objective narratives from The Joke and the comic characters in Life Is Elsewhere, The Farewell Party, and sections of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, the protagonists of Unbearable Lightness, Tomas, Tereza, Sabina, and Franz, are treated with the same amount of "fatherly love" (an appropriate adjective for Kundera's novelistic attitude towards his characters) as Tamina in Laughter and Forgetting. Naturally, there is the inevitable ironic touch to Kundera's narration in this novel, but a level of irony which stays far below what might be considered exaggerated or satiric. Some critics and readers go so far as to say that they feel touched by the characters in a way in which no other novel by Kundera has been capable. Another interesting fact to note is that out of all of Kundera's novels, Unbearable Lightness, his best selling work to date, is the only work to have been filmed and released on a mainstream, international level (1988) with celebrated actors and well-known technicians.¹

The novel's story is about a Prague surgeon, Tomas, a divorced father, who lives his life searching for the individuality in women by sleeping with as many as

possible. His favorite mistress is Sabina, an experimental artist who adores Tomas because, like herself, he is free of conventional personal commitment. By a series of coincidences, however, Tomas encounters Tereza, a bar waitress who has grown up under a browbeating, abusive mother in a small spa town. Finding that she no longer feels self-conscious about her body in the company of Tomas, Tereza follows the doctor to Prague, moves in with him, and eventually marries him. She becomes depressed and suicidal, however, whenever she learns of Tomas' infidelities because she is reminded once again of the insignificance of her body to her husband. Tomas, on the other hand, cannot understand why he feels differently about Tereza rather than feeling cavalier as he does towards his other lovers. He cannot resist Tereza because, for the first time, he feels compassion. Sabina treats Tereza as a friend, though, and finds her a job as a photographer. After the Russian tanks invade Czechoslovakia in 1968, Tomas and Tereza, compromised by the photos that Tereza has taken of the event, flee to Zurich (Sabina has moved to Geneva), but, as Tomas' infidelities continue, Tereza feels that she is not strong enough to live in exile and returns to Prague. Tomas sees Sabina for the last time and returns, out of compassion, to Tereza and Prague. In Geneva, Sabina meets Franz, a married university professor who idolizes

her, yet is too idealistic to actually understand her. Once Franz leaves his wife, Sabina betrays him and leaves Switzerland for France (and later for America). Franz continues to idolize Sabina, however, and, believing that she would support his efforts, joins a pacifist movement to aid the victims of war in Cambodia. The movement is a failure, and Franz is killed by hoodlums in Bangkok. Back in Prague, Tomas has been forced down to the lowly position of window washer because of a short article he wrote against the Czech communist movement prior to the invasion. His infidelities continue, of course, and Tereza, hoping to achieve the strength of her husband, initiates a sexual encounter with an engineer in the bar where she works. The rendezvous makes her feel more self-conscious and depressed than before and she begins to suspect that the engineer has been set up by the Communists in order to blackmail her. Fearfully, she convinces Tomas to move with her to a country farm, where the two finally achieve simultaneous happiness before the death of their dog, Karenin, and their own deaths in an automobile accident.

As can be seen from this summary, there is a great deal of detail applied to each of the character's lives and personalities. What is especially important to note, moreover, is the fact that Kundera not only gives an account of these incidents, but does so with shifting

areas of concentration. Like the previous four novels, Unbearable Lightness consists of seven sections or parts. Parts one and five (both titled "Lightness and Weight") concentrate on the character of Tomas, with part one moving through Tomas' first meeting with Tereza to his return to Prague from Switzerland and part five picking up his thread of story line as he grapples with the Communists over his article and finally becomes a window washer. Parts two and four (both titled "Soul and Body") concentrate on the character of Tereza with part two revealing Tereza's past, her meeting with Tomas, her photography, and her return to Prague from Switzerland and part four, running concurrently with Tomas' part five, dealing with her discovery of Tomas' infidelities and her encounter with the engineer. Part seven concerns the time the couple spend on the farm. Parts three and six, however, violate this sense of time and story-telling in that certain facts are revealed long before they occur; most notably, the deaths of Tomas and Tereza are related to Sabina through a letter on page 122 of the 314-page novel (the last scene in the novel takes place on the night prior to the automobile accident). The two sections of the novel concentrate on the lives of Sabina and Franz, but, in keeping with this sense of time displacement, follow the course of their relationship

haphazardly by referring to Sabina's betrayal and Franz's death long before either event occurs.

This sense of time and concentration, while not a major consideration for this study, is a full realization of the possibilities first encountered with the shifting perspectives in The Joke, the "Middle-Aged Man" section of Life Is Elsewhere, and the two sections on Tamina in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting in that Kundera is able to apply an equal amount of narratorial concentration on each of the four characters. E.L. Doctorow's review of Unbearable Lightness states, for example, that "Kundera knows how to get ahead of his story and circle back to it and run it through again with a different emphasis" (46). What seems to designate this novel as being more successful than its predecessors, however, is the fact that with this shifting of concentration and time, Kundera is able to explore fully the philosophical question of the entire novel by focusing on the personalized thematic motifs of each of the four characters, through digressions, as they relate to the overall philosophic theme, on an individual basis.

One might question this use of digressions in Unbearable Lightness since the story is so skillfully drawn together as an autonomous tale. Like The Farewell Party, this novel could, perhaps, rest on its own ability simply to present plausible characters within a realistic

setting. Tomas' infidelities and Sabina's constant rejections alone might make a powerful novel. Italo Calvino, the Italian novelist whose novels' narratorial devices run parallel to Kundera's metafictional narrator, comments: "Among Kundera's readers, there will be those taken more with the goings-on and those (I, for example) more with the digressions. But even these become the tale" (53). It would be pointless, then, for this study to argue the merits of the story as being above those of the theme since the two are, for what seems to be a first time in Kundera's writing career, equally successful.

On the other hand, one might also wonder, as is the case with the reviewers of Life Is Elsewhere, whether Kundera's exploratory questions and the use of digression make the novelist into the "tyrant" Doctorow calls him. Is Unbearable Lightness just another philosophical novel with disposable characters? Kundera explains:

That reflection [the first two chapters of the novel which explain Nietzsche's theory of eternal return] introduces directly, from the very first line of the novel, the fundamental situation of a character--Tomas; it sets out his problem: the lightness of existence in a world where there is no eternal return. You see, we've finally come back to our question: What lies beyond the so-called psychological novel: Or, put another way: What is the nonpsychological means to apprehend the self? To apprehend the self in my novels means to grasp the essence of its existential problem. To grasp its existential code. (Art 29)

The novel is not, therefore, a stylistic exercise in an analysis of the overlying question presented to the

reader within the first few pages of the work. Although the reader is aware of the fact that Tomas is only a literary character, that awareness extends to the point of realization that the characters in Unbearable Lightness are not flat creations such as Alain Robbe-Grillet's characters in Last Year At Marienbad (aptly named X, A, and M!). Furthermore, the characters in Kundera's novel would be flat only if the novel answers the overlying question. Since Kundera is only exploring the existential query, Tomas, Tereza, Sabina, and Franz are given free rein and exist without limitations. Kundera "sets them in motion," in other words, to see the possibilities of the overall theme.

The balance between psychological study of fictive character and exploration of theme is undeniable simply because, within one of the novel's numerous digressions, the metafictional narrator allows the space to include such information. At the beginning of Tereza's first section, for instance, the narrator takes the opportunity to explain to the suspicious reader what is taking place through a Metafictional Statement digression: "It would be senseless for the author to try to convince the reader that his characters once actually lived. They were not born of a mother's womb; they were born of a stimulating phrase or two or from a basic situation" (39). And later, within Tomas' second section (part five) of the

novel, the narrator stops the telling of the story as if pressing a pause button on a tape recorder to say:

The characters in my novels are my own unrealized possibilities. That is why I am equally fond of them all and equally horrified by them. Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented. It is that crossed border (the border which my own "I" ends) which attracts me most. For beyond that border begins the secret the novel asks about.
(221)

The reader must know then, without the benefit of The Art of the Novel or any other explanatory article, that Kundera's novel is an exploration with equality between story and theme. The benefit of the technique of digression is that it can be used to impart such information to a confused or unaccustomed reader.

But what of this "secret"? What is this exploratory question? Kundera's narrator provides this information as well. The opening paragraph of the novel reads as follows:

The idea of eternal return is a mysterious one, Nietzsche has often perplexed other philosophers with it: to think that everything recurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum! What does this mad myth signify? (3)

The exploratory question is designated, and the novel is set in motion. Each chapter of each section, in a way which precludes the interpretation of non-unity by which so many critics seem to label The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, is recognizable as an exploration of this preliminary question. The narrator designates the theme

once more for the reader late in the novel: "The novel is not the author's confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become" (221). The title itself, like Kundera's previous novel, manages to explain the theme and the subject of the book even to the chance bookstore browser: The Unbearable Lightness of Being.

This overlying theme, Kundera's interpretation of Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence which, as Italo Calvino mentions, "the possible meaning of which has never been agreed upon" (54) and which carries further the theme of the "laughter of angels" of the previous novel,² seems to find its roots in cyclical versus linear time. Nietzsche's The Will to Power offers one of the best explanations of eternal recurrence, a theory which appears sporadically in the philosopher's work:

Let us imagine this thought [the "most paralysing of thoughts": that value is unattainable to humankind] in its worst form: existence, as it is, without an end in nonentity: "Eternal Recurrence."

This is the extremest form of Nihilism: nothing (purposelessness) eternal! (48)

If Nietzsche's theory is an indication that everything in the world occurs again and again, then humankind is burdened with the fact that every action is a cog in the machinery of what some might see as predestination. Humankind cannot learn from past error, and perfection is unattainable since life is lived only once. On the other

hand, Kundera's narrator tells us through Philosophic Exploration digression, man has the opposing belief of free will in which each action can be a break from the weight of responsibility. Out of those critics courageous enough to explain Nietzsche's theory in its relationship to *Unbearable Lightness*, Calvino's statements seem to be the most accessible:

If the "eternal recurrence" . . . is the return of the same, a unique and unrepeatable life is precisely equal to a life infinitely repeated: every act is irrevocable, non-modifiable for eternity. If the "eternal recurrence" is, instead, a repetition of rhythms, patterns, structures, hieroglyphics of fate that leave room for infinite little variants in detail, then one could consider the possible as an ensemble of statistical fluctuations in which every event would not exclude better or worse alternatives and the finality of every gesture would end up lightened. (54)

The second chapter of this first section ends, therefore, with the dilemma between lightness and weight. Which of the two is better? The reader recognizes at this point in the novel that what follows will be an investigation of the two opposing forms.

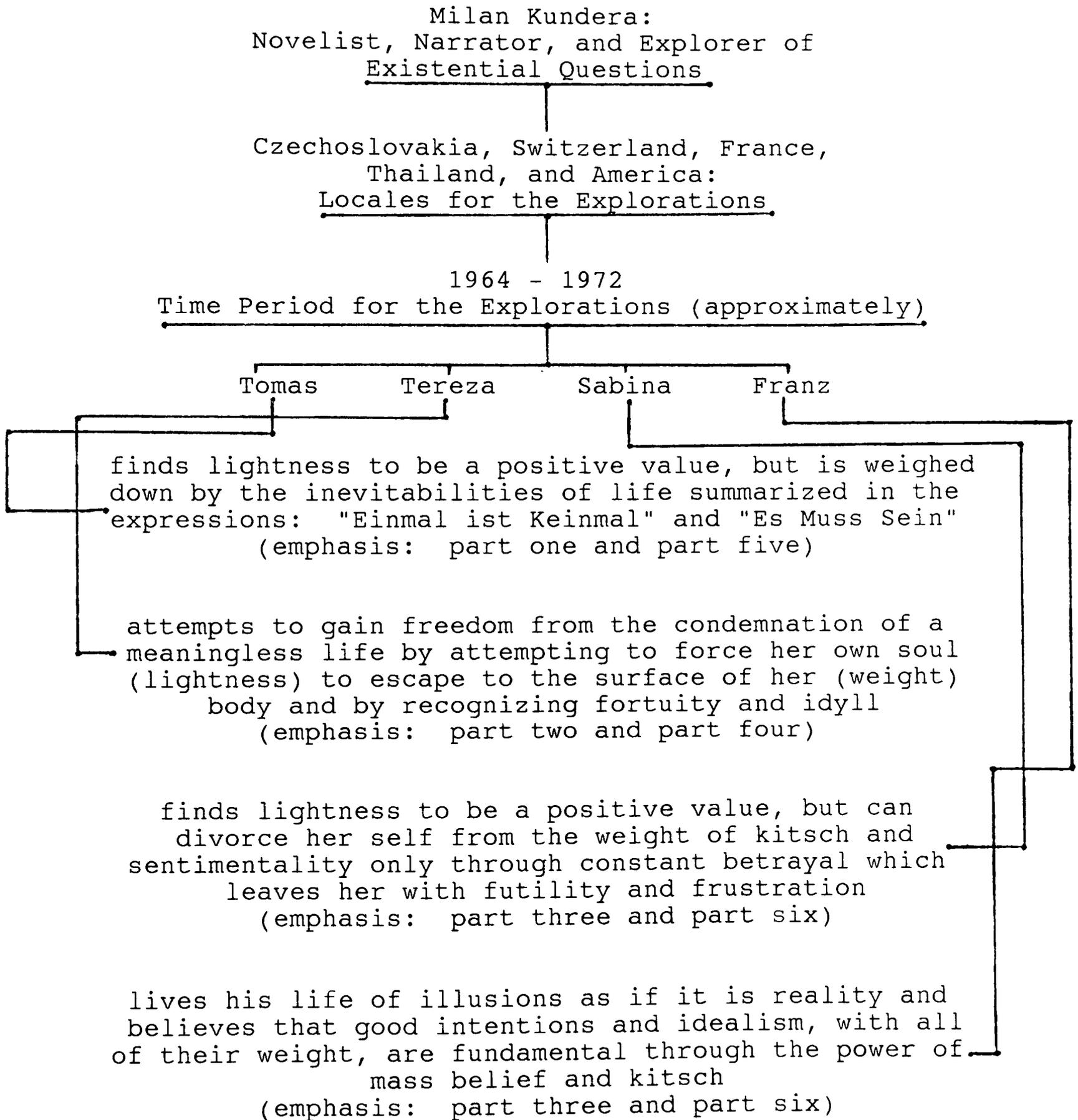
Moving the direction of this chapter back to the use of characters once more will explain how this theme is explored through characters and digressions upon those characters. Kundera cannot succeed with his novel if he simply leaps from the first two chapters on theme into the telling of the story; there must be some underlying

"subquestions" to apply to each character through the use of "code words":

As I was writing The Unbearable Lightness of Being, I realized that the code of this or that character is made up of certain key words. For Tereza: body, soul, vertigo, weakness, idyll, Paradise. For Tomas: lightness, weight. In the part called "Words Misunderstood [part three]," I examine the existential codes of Franz and Sabina by analyzing a number of words: woman, fidelity, betrayal, music, darkness, light, parades, beauty, country, cemetery, strength. Each of these words has a different meaning in the other person's existential code. Of course, the existential code is not examined in abstracto; it reveals itself progressively in the action, in the situations. (Art 29-30)

Thus, throughout the seven sections of the novel, as Kundera relates the story of each character to the reader, the code words are explained to the reader through the narrator's digressions in order to ponder this question of whether lightness is better than weight or whether weight is better than lightness. Seen as a whole, the thematic structure of the novel might appear to resemble something of the following diagram (see figure 1: Narratorial Hierarchy). Through the technique of narratorial digression, then, Kundera moves through the exploration of his question: which is better, lightness or weight? by concentrating not only on individual characters in individual sections of the novel, but by also instilling these characters with theme-related code words which are designed to offer the reader and the novel subsequent avenues to follow for the exploration.

Figure 1: Narratorial Hierarchy



Tomas

While Kundera has stated that each of the characters are equally important to him, one seems to perceive Tomas as being the protagonist of the novel due to the importance of his existential coding. Kundera introduces this character before any of the other characters in the third chapter of the first section in the following manner: "I have been thinking about Tomas for many years. But only in light of these reflections [chapters one and two] did I see him clearly. I saw him standing at the window of his flat . . . not knowing what to do" (6).³ In an interview given to Jason Weiss, Kundera referred to the connection between this philosophy and Tomas by saying: "But one doesn't realize that this beginning with Nietzsche is an introduction to Tomas, to the problematic existence of Tomas. So, it's a novelistic meditation, connected to a character" (406). Tomas is then linked directly to the major question of the novel and the reader is made to understand at this point in the novel that through Ironic Character Observation digressions and Philosophic Exploration digressions on the character of Tomas, Kundera is about to explore the questions of lightness and weight to a deeper extent.

The actions of Tomas' character seem to revolve directly around lightness and weight. Tomas considers

the fact that life is lived but once and the chance to return to a dilemma is never given. "Einmal ist keinmal", says Tomas to himself. What happens but once, says the German adage, might as well not have happened at all. If we have only one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all" (Unbearable 8). Since Tomas dislikes this human condition, he strives to live his life with as few commitments as possible. Having divorced his wife and alienated himself from his parents and his son, Tomas enjoys the freedom of the "erotic friendship" (12) in which he sleeps with any number of mistresses with the understanding that love never enters into the relationship. Once love becomes a part of any relationship, the narrator informs us of Tomas, responsibility and commitment enter the coupling as well, thereby creating the "weight" of living which Tomas so passionately avoids.

Tomas lives happily with this lifestyle until Tereza enters his life like "a child put in a pitch-daubed bulrush basket and sent downstream" (10) and his attitude towards commitment changes to that of weight from the "lightness" of infidelity and avoidance of commitment. Tereza, the reader is made to understand through the narrator's Psychological Observation digressions, is a different sort of woman for Tomas. He feels guilty for betraying her for other women because he feels compassion

for her; for the first time in his life, Tomas cannot maintain an "erotic friendship" with another woman.

Kundera stops the touching story after Tereza begins to experience horrifying nightmares after learning of Tomas' infidelities. The reader certainly wishes to know why Tomas is not able to reject Tereza as he would another clinging mistress, so Kundera offers an explanation by defining the word "compassion" through a Definition Digression:

In languages that form the word "compassion" not from the root "suffering" but from the root "feeling," the word is used in approximately the same way, but to contend that it designates a bad or inferior sentiment is difficult. The secret strength of its etymology floods the word with another light and gives it a broader meaning: to have compassion (co-feeling) means not only to be able to live with the other's misfortune but also to feel with him any emotion--joy, anxiety, happiness, pain. This kind of compassion . . . therefore signifies the maximal capacity of affective imagination, the art of emotional telepathy. In the hierarchy of sentiments, then, it is supreme. (20)

By defining one of Tomas' main code-words through this digression, Kundera is able to explore this aspect of the "lightness/weight" question to enable the reader to understand Tomas' behavior. Tomas feels compassion for Tereza so he is "bound" by the emotion as if to a stone or a weight.

Just as it is only out of compassion that Tomas does not throw Tereza out of his life, it is only through this novelistic digression that Kundera is able to make his

readers understand this aspect of the theory of eternal return. Easily, Kundera could write a novel about a man who is bound to his wife, jealousy and all, out of compassion through a representational telling of the story. By exposing the connections which rest between Tomas' unwanted compassion for Tereza and the theme of eternal return with a Philosophic Exploration digression, Kundera is able to demonstrate the deterministic forces at work in both situations. Tomas feels bound, the narrator tells us, in the same way that humankind may be bound to an ever-recurring cycle of the same absurd, inexplicable events.

The story must continue, though, and Tomas is confronted with the weight of compassion again and again throughout section one of the novel. His mistresses leave him once they discover that he has broken the rules of "erotic friendship"; he finds that compassion can lead to a tighter know to weighty existence when he decides to marry Tereza, and he feels compelled to move from Prague to Zurich after Tereza's photographs of the invasion compromise the two.

Tomas' main confrontation with weighty existence comes about when, after Tereza has returned to communist Czechoslovakia from Switzerland, he is faced with the dilemma of continuing his happy existence in Zurich or returning to the commitment which he has made to his wife

and a land which is ruled by weighty oppression. After reading Tereza's farewell note, Tomas vacillates between living in Prague or Zurich, with Tereza or with a countless number of women, as a married man or as a bachelor; a dilemma between weight and lightness.

Kundera's narrator interrupts Tomas' ruminations to explain the situation with an Ironic Character Observation digression:

Yes, it was unbearable for him to stay in Zurich imagining Tereza living on her own in Prague.

But how long would he have been tortured by compassion? All his life? A year? Or a month? Or only a week?

How could he have known? How could he have gauged it?

Any schoolboy can do experiments in the physics laboratory to test various scientific hypotheses. But man, because he has only one life to live, cannot conduct experiments to test whether to follow his passion (compassion) or not. (33-34)

On the border of one of the most significant choices of his life, Tomas can only say to himself, "Es Muss Sein!", a line from one of his favorite (and Kundera's favorite, as we are told) pieces of music by Beethoven. "It must be!" (34) Tomas says to himself as he anguishes over the fact that he will never be able to know what his life would have been like had he not decided to drive back to Prague and certain oppression.⁴

But even after his return to Prague, the dilemmas persist for Tomas as he is confronted with a perpetual longing to betray the "weights" in his life for a freer

existence. Compromised by a letter which he wrote to a newspaper prior to the short Swiss period in his life, Tomas is asked to write a disclaimer or quit his job. Wanting to be strong in principle, Tomas submits to a demotion to a miserable job in a country clinic. When an official visits him to request again the disclaimer to the letter, Tomas decides to reject everything and become a window washer, a job which would invite no interference from the Communists.

Without a doubt, such a complication in plot demands further explanation. Tomas has spent his entire life to achieve his high position as a brain surgeon. Why does he refuse to write a simple disclaimer to a letter for which, as the narrator tells us, Tomas has no regard? Why does he allow himself to be pulled all the way down to such an embarrassing, blue-collar job over a piece of paper? Kundera's narrator returns to Tomas' motif: "Ess Muss Sein!" in chapter seven of the second half of Tomas' story ("Lightness and Weight": Part Five). A portion of the Ironic Character Observation digression reads:

Granted, a man has a right to fear dangers that are less than likely to occur. Granted, he [Tomas] was annoyed with himself and his clumsiness, and desired to avoid further contact with the police and the concomitant feeling of helplessness. And granted, he had lost his profession anyway, because the mechanical aspirin-medicine he practiced at the clinic had nothing in common with his concept of medicine. Even so, the way he rushed into his decision seems rather odd to me. Could it perhaps

conceal something else, something deeper that escaped his reasoning? (194)

The digression extends into chapter eight as Kundera explains to the reader that Tomas must have a need to betray everything which holds him down in some form or another. He takes the job as window washer as a "vacation" from his regular profession, a profession which Tomas now sees as yet another weight which creates an unbearable situation for him. Also, with a job as window washer, Tomas is able to sleep with hundreds of woman on a regular basis. (Woman begin to call the agency to request Tomas, but offer him wine and sexual intercourse instead of dirty windows when he arrives at their apartments.)

The importance of this quoted passage, however, lies in the fact that Kundera openly admits that he does not know what Tomas is doing. Thackeray concludes his novel Vanity Fair by implying to the reader that his characters have been only puppets all along and that they must be put away now that the story is over. If Tomas is Kundera's puppet, though, he (and the other three main characters) are puppets which have lives, thoughts, and limits which are beyond the control of the narrator. Tomas' decisions are, as Kundera explains, the novelist's "Own unrealized possibilities"; Tomas can go as far as he

wants to go in order to explore the boundaries of the existential question titling the entire novel.

Kundera's digressions, moreover, can show this fact to the readers in all clarity. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Unbearable Lightness balances the amount of philosophic exploration with psychological exploration. Since Kundera assumes the ability to digress in his novel, with the help of any of the six digression types, he is able to demonstrate his own power as novelist and explorer of existential questions. In the case of Tomas, the digressions not only allow Kundera to consciously make the connection between psychological state and philosophic theme, but also to explain to the reader that Tomas is not entirely under the control of the narrator or the novel.

Tereza

As the discussion of Tomas' character and corresponding digressions would indicate, the relationship between these two main characters is not one which helps Tomas achieve the lightness he so yearningly seeks. Although she inadvertently seeks lightness, Tereza somehow manages to create a weight of commitment for Tomas.

Even though it is described in metaphysical terms, Tereza's "weight" is seen through "physical" descriptions. Having grown up under the care of a mother

who denies the beauty of the human body, Tereza is taught that all bodies are the same and that ultimately, all bodies are equally ugly and with no redeeming special qualities. She desires, hence a freedom from her own body. She longs for her soul to be released from this universal "ugliness" of physicality so that she will not be seen in terms of abstraction and nothingness.

When she is in the company of Tomas, Tereza feels her soul rising to the surface of her body and the feeling intoxicates her. She holds tightly to Tomas and longs to be part of his life because without him, she feels "weighted" down by her own body and a return to her mother's attitude toward nakedness. Tomas' infidelities add further complication to Tereza's desires since she feels that Tomas considers all female bodies to be the same, her own included (eternal return seen in the form of the concept that universality of the naked body equals abstraction and negation).

The shifting to Tereza's character adds another dimension to the shifting concentration technique which Kundera employs in Unbearable Lightness. After section one of the novel ends and the reader finds Tomas lying in bed with Tereza, miserable over his return to oppression in Czechoslovakia, section two begins and starts the whole story over again in order to analyze Tereza's motivations and existential motifs. Edmund White notices

this change in his essay on the novel, "Kundera a la Mode":

One of the wisest moments in [the novel] comes early on, just after we've seen Tereza's tiresome "jealousy" from the point of view [Kundera's shifting concentration] of her lover, the harassed libertine, Tomas. Suddenly we're shown everything again, from her point of view, and we see that her "jealousy" is in fact her fear of sinking back into the bestiality of her childhood. (582)

Thus, despite the fact that Tomas seems to be the chief thematic character for the work, the reader soon realizes that equal amounts of consideration are given to the other three characters as well.

Returning to Tereza's existential, physical motifs, however, will show the tendencies of her character to be just as vacillating as those of Tomas. For if the reader is to learn that Tomas cannot break from Tereza because of his "compassion," the reader must also learn, through the narrator's digressions, how Tereza came to love Tomas so much and why he is the man to whom she holds so strongly.

In the second section of the novel, "Soul and Body," then, Kundera discusses Tereza's first meeting with Tomas when he came to the spa town for an operation. Miserable in her waitressing job at the hotel where Tomas is staying, Tereza looks up and sees Tomas only to experience what the narrator, in a Philosophic Exploration digression, refers to as "fortuitous coincidence":

But is not an event in fact more significant and noteworthy the greater the number of fortuities necessary to bring it about?

Chance and chance alone has a message for us. Everything that occurs out of necessity, everything expected, repeated day in and day out, is mute. Only chance can speak to us. We read its message much as gypsies read the images made by coffee grounds at the bottom of a cup. (48)

. . .

Necessity knows no magic formulae--they are all left to chance. If a love is to be unforgettable, fortuities must immediately start fluttering down to it like birds to Francis of Assissi's shoulders. (49)

Tereza has grown up in a town devoid of culture and "something higher," things such as literature and music which she associates with the beauty of the soul and counter to the uniformity and absurdity of universal nakedness. She sees Tomas sitting at a table with a book while Beethoven is playing on the radio. He is staying in room six of the hotel, the number of the apartment in Prague where Tereza spent the first few years of her childhood. When she meets him later that evening, he is sitting on her favorite bench in the park. Tereza applies immediately an amount of significance to these happy coincidences and realizes that she is in love with Tomas and that she must follow him back to Prague in order for her soul to rise to the surface of her body.

This notion of body and soul is also explained to the reader through a narratorial digression. Not surprisingly, Kundera explains these notions at the beginning of the second section of the novel before he moves

into the representational mode of story-telling of Tereza's childhood and first meeting with Tomas. The narrator describes the phenomenon with the following Philosophic Exploration digression:

Ever since man has learned to give each part of the body a name, the body has given him less trouble. He has also learned that the soul is nothing more than the gray matter of the brain in action. The old duality of body and soul has become shrouded in scientific terminology, and we can laugh at it as merely an obsolete prejudice.

But just make someone who has fallen in love listen to his stomach rumble, and the unity of body and soul, that lyrical illusion of the age of science, instantly fades away.

Tereza, unhappy with her own body due to her mother's negation of physicality, longs, then, to see her soul looking back at her when she looks in the mirror. In times of depression, she sees only her body and it repels her. When she is in love and is living in contentment with Tomas, she is able to look in the mirror and see her "self," her individuality and the "something higher" which she has sought, looking back at her.

The complication, of course, lies in the fact that with Tomas, Tereza's soul journeys back and forth between the surface of the body and the depths of the body (or bowels, the narrator conveniently tells us, since it is a negative occurrence) because of his infidelities. The move to Switzerland, for instance, brings about suffering for her character since she is unable to escape her life with him. In Prague, she could always move back to the

unhappy yet tolerable life in the spa town. In Switzerland, she must depend upon Tomas for everything. Longing to return to Prague, a return of the soul to the depths of the body, Tereza begins to experience the weakness of vertigo, a condition which the narrator defines for the reader through a Definition Digression in chapter seventeen of Tereza's first section:

Anyone whose goal is "something higher" must expect some day to suffer vertigo. What is vertigo? Fear of falling? Then why do we feel it even when the observation tower comes equipped with a sturdy handrail? No, vertigo is something other than the fear of falling. It is the voice of the emptiness below us which tempts and lures us, it is the desire to fall, against which, terrified, we defend ourselves. (59-60)

Tereza's vertigo, therefore, is related to the overall question of lightness/weight since Tereza, in her attempts to achieve lightness, is terrified of falling back into the ugly bowels of her body, or weight. Vertigo is simply another avenue of exploration for the character to explore, thus for the reader to explore.

Tereza's passion for "something higher" is a characteristic of which Kundera makes a clean explanation. Tereza, somewhat similar to Tamina in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, longs for the cyclical aspect of life; the laughter of angels, to borrow that term from the previous novel. If she is to be happy, then she finds the concept of eternal return, with all of its weight, to be positive.

As one could infer, Tereza's longing is not easy to explain since Nietzsche's theory might seem to be difficult to grasp as being something "good" or "sought after." Kundera, then, brings in what could be construed as a fifth main character for the novel, Karenin, the couple's dog. Karenin, the narrator explains through a digression, lives in "dog time" which is a cyclical pattern knowing no passage. Karenin sees each day not as a continuation of the day before, but as a repetition of the day before. The narrator proceeds to explain that Karenin, like most dogs, is happy because Tomas and Tereza (especially) are devoted to his happiness. Karenin's life, then, is an "idyll"; an eternal return, but an eternal return of something good and desirable.

Tereza's happiness, an eternal escape of her soul to the surface of her body, is explained through a digression on her existential motif of "idyll." In chapter four of the final section of the novel, "Karenin's Smile," the narrator gives the reader the necessary information to enable understanding of the situation through a Philosophic Exploration digression:

Why was the word "idyll" so important to Tereza?

Raised as we are on the mythology of the Old Testament, we might say that an idyll is an image that has remained with us like a memory of Paradise: life in Paradise was not like following a straight line to the unknown; it was not an adventure. It moved in a circle among known objects. Its monotony bred happiness, not boredom.

Thus the narrator explains that Tereza desires to move from Prague, where she is confronted with the possibility of misery and embarrassment from the encounter with the engineer and where her soul seems to be permanently bound within her body, in order to achieve a happiness in the country where she can live each day free from fears of infidelity on behalf of Tomas and where she can spend time reading and playing with Karenin. In the country, each day will be a repetition of the day before for Tereza; a happiness wherein the only changes are known changes (old age, seasons, etc.). Life in the country promises to be a paradise for Tereza in that it will be eternal repetition and security.

It is through these digressions that the narrator is able to explain that Tereza, unlike Tomas, is happier with the concept of eternal return and perpetuity. Although explained as a "weighty" concern in sections one and six for Tomas, in sections two, four, and seven, weight, seen through the avenue (or motif) of "idyll" is a feeling of lightness and happiness for Tereza.⁶ counterpointing the digressions on Tomas' character and philosophy, Kundera's digressions on Tereza explore the question of lightness and weight to the very end; they allow the reader to see, through Tereza's attempts at happiness, some form of end to the paradoxical question and a definition of supporting terms.

Sabina

What makes Unbearable Lightness successful, perhaps, is the two secondary characters Sabina and Franz. The novel's discussion of Tomas and Tereza creates a decent balance between them in the way that the discussions of the paradoxical characters of Maman and Jaromil from Life Is Elsewhere operate, but for the more complicated theme of this fifth novel, more depth is required. Kundera commented upon this aspect of Unbearable Lightness in the Jason Weiss interview:

For me, it's always a question of counterpoint. You have a story of Tamina in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting; it fascinated me a lot but it was never right. Suddenly, I was searching for another motif that could create a harmony with this story. I found this harmony in thinking of joining it with a memory that was completely real, the death of my father. And at that moment, I knew that was it. Here perhaps it's the same thing, the counterpoint of this story was that of Sabina and Franz. (405-6)

With the "Words Misunderstood" and "The Grand March" sections of the novel, then, Kundera offers two secondary areas of concentration to counterpoint the five sections of Tereza and Tomas for balance. Unbearable Lightness features, hence, Tomas and Tereza inadvertently working against each other in their respective quests for lightness and weight, but coordinating their stories with the couple of Sabina and Franz, also inadvertently working against each other as they attempt to reconcile

themselves to their own lives through respective attempts at lightness and weight.

Sabina, however, is the exceptional character of the novel. Looking back at the summary of the novel will show that she is the only character who does not die in the novel. The last the reader sees of her character is a short chapter on her life in California, years after the deaths of Tomas, Tereza, and Franz. Kundera never returns to her character and the reader is left with a question mark.

Sabina's fate or final outcome is decipherable, nevertheless, since the narrator's digressions offer some clues as to her essence and existential coding. Sabina, like Tomas, seeks a life of lightness which can only be obtained through a life of betrayal and denial of kitsch (Franz's main existential code word). According to some critics, Sabina's life has made such a vigorous attempt to free itself from the weight of existence. Perhaps she, unlike the other three characters who die beneath the weight of some physical object, manages to betray life to the extent of total freedom. The reader of this novel, this novel so firmly placed within the postmodern movement with all of its oneiric narratives and magical realism, may decide that Sabina ultimately betrays the novel itself and floats right off of the pages. One must

remember that Kundera himself writes that his characters are beyond his control.

Betrayal, Sabina's main code word, characterizes her entire life. Coerced into the early putsch of the communist movement in Czechoslovakia, alienated from her family, and forced to paint only representational, social activist paintings, Sabina betrays everything: the communist movement, her family, lovers, her country, and especially the phony "artistic" realism of the period. She sees, as Tomas sees, everything in terms of commitment and boundary, and she longs to break free of any weights, expectations, and conventions. Sabina declares in "The Grand March" section of the novel, "My enemy is kitsch . . .!" and the reader believes that her longing for freedom and lightness will never end.

In the "Words Misunderstood" section of the novel, Kundera incorporates chapters for the novel which are not unlike "The Poet on the Run" section of Life Is Elsewhere in terms of experimentation and explanation. Chapters three, five, and seven of this section are titled "A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words" in which the narrator, using a writing style almost as digressive as that found in the sections of Tomas and Tereza, selects four or five words for each chapter and discusses how the words are understood differently by Franz and Sabina. Strength, cemetery, parades, fidelity, and betrayal are

words upon which Franz and Sabina disagree as being positive or negative and through which Kundera is able to explore the avenues lying below the lightness/weight question. Each word or term in these three short dictionaries, then, are the bases for the conflict between Sabina, a character who longs for lightness, and Franz, who longs for weight.

It is important to note, in any case, that, unlike the other five sections of the novel, "Words Misunderstood" and "The Grand March" are not about the characters of Sabina and Franz respectively. Although more facts and focus are given to Sabina in the first section, to Franz in the second, the digressions and narratorial concentration rest on both characters at the same time. Exclusive concentration, we must assume, would eliminate Kundera's intentions for successful counterpoint.

Even so, one of the most important digressions for Sabina's character is displayed in the fourth chapter of "Words Misunderstood" after Sabina attends a discussion with some of her fellow Czech emigres. Sabina quarrels with the main speaker of the group and eventually leaves the circle in anger; the group of emigres becomes another item on her list or road of betrayals:

Then why wasn't she sorry for them [the emigres]? Why didn't she seem them for the woeful and abandoned creatures they were?

We know why. After she betrayed her father, life opened up before her, a long road of betrayals, each

one attracting her as vice and victory. She would not keep ranks! She refused to keep ranks--always with the same people, with the same speeches! That was why she was so stirred by her own injustice. But it was not an unpleasant feeling; quite the contrary, Sabina had the impression she had just scored a victory and someone invisible was applauding her for it. (97-98)

The narratorial voice has stopped the representational action of the story (Sabina walking away from the meeting place to catch a train) in order to ask a few questions about her character and explore the answers to these questions with the reader through an Ironic Character Observation digression. What the narrator has to say in information of which Sabina is not aware. She is pleased with herself at the moment, but she does not understand why, specifically. The reader does not understand either until the narrator interjects the explanation through a digression.

The short dictionaries, too, are formed in the manner of Definition Digressions by themselves. Using the subheadings within these three chapters, Kundera all but announces that he, the narrator, has sectioned off the lives of these two characters for a close discussion. After the words "Fidelity and Betrayal" are placed in this chapter, Kundera offers the reader a few short paragraphs to define the word, show how both Franz and Sabina interpret the word, and show the positive and

negative aspects of the word. The following paragraph appears in this section:

Betrayal. From tender youth we are told by father and teacher that betrayal is the most heinous offense imaginable. But what is betrayal? Betrayal means breaking ranks and going off into the unknown. Sabina knew of nothing more magnificent than going off into the unknown. (91)

The digression on betrayal links the existential code word to the overlying philosophy of the novel. Sabina, unlike Tereza, longs for the unknown; a linear road of life which changes from day to day by betraying the responsibility associated with the eternal return. Tereza, we must remember, ultimately longs for cyclical time (eternal return) where everything is known, expected, and secure. By traveling down the road of betrayals in a straight line, Sabina is able to free herself again and again from the constrictions of human existence in all of its forms. She continues from the Czech emigres to betray Franz, to see Tomas for the last time, to see Switzerland for the last time, to see France for the last time, and so on. Everything she does, Kundera's digressions inform us, is for the purpose of lightness--a state which, we are led to believe, she ultimately achieves.

Franz

It would be a simple task to build this entire chapter (or even an entire thesis) around the section of the novel titled "The Grand March." Like "The Middle-Aged Man" section of Life Is Elsewhere and "The Angels" sections of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, "The Grand March" can be seen as a novelistic essay in itself. Within this section, Kundera discusses the death of Stalin's son, a longish definition of the word "kitsch," parallel references to all four characters, and Franz's journey to Cambodia in order to elaborate on this attitude for movements and the existential code word "kitsch." More than half of the articles and reviews on Unbearable Lightness focus on this section of the novel and it is my opinion that the section is Kundera's greatest achievement.

Kundera himself recognizes the power of his own creation in The Art of the Novel in the "Dialogue on the Art of Composition" interview:

The sixth part is laid out not as a story but as an essay (an essay on kitsch). Fragments of the character's lives are interpolated into the essay as "examples," as "situations to be analyzed." It is thus--incidentally and briefly--that the reader learns about the ends of Franz's and [arguably] Sabina's lives, and about the outcome of the relations between Tomas and his son. That ellipsis lightens the structure tremendously.

The events of Part Six occur after the events of the seventh and last part. Because of that dislocation, the last part, despite its idyllic quality, is

flooded with a melancholy that comes from our knowledge of what is to happen. (77)

It would seem that the digressions in "The Grand March," as is the case with The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, become the dominating aspect of the section which causes the representational story-telling to be subordinate. The balance between the representational and the interpretive is violated until the latter half of the section when the narrator concentrates more on the journey to Cambodia.

As mentioned before, this lesson on the word "kitsch" becomes an elaborate digression which allows the reader to understand fully the main word in Franz's existential code, a digression which leads to the understanding of the theme of the entire novel.

Franz, like Tereza, unknowingly seeks the idyll, the paradise of eternal return wherein all is eternally understandable and secure. From the digressions in this section of the novel, the reader learns that Franz's passion for movements of any kind masks a deeper longing for universal, eternal belief in what he feels to be correct and acceptable. In the "Words Misunderstood" section of the novel, the reader learns that Franz does not sleep with Sabina in Geneva because the closeness in location violates his strong belief in propriety; he cannot leave one woman's bed to go straight to the bed of

his wife. As an alternative, he takes Sabina on trips throughout Europe (with one trip to New York City) in order to leave the propriety of his marriage intact. The reader also learns that Franz adores Sabina not for who she is, but for the abstract things that he feels she represents; Franz idolizes truth and justice, so Sabina, as emigre from a communist country, coincides with this belief. The reader is quick to discover that Franz never sees the reality of the situation because he is all too ready to see the implications of Sabina's personality instead. Kundera categorizes Franz as being a dreamer.

These dreams and abstractions of belief coordinate with Kundera's exploration of the word kitsch, "the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence" (248). For Kundera, kitsch is a "folding screen set up to curtain off death" (253), a state of mind in which a person or a people deny the fact that, as humans, everyone defecates and dies at some point, even Jesus Christ. Naturally, Franz possesses this state of mind, since he constantly overlooks what is real about a situation in order to see the powerful, undeniable, yet ultimately false abstraction of the situation.

The narrator chooses the moment of epiphany for Franz to digress upon the situation. After Franz arrives in Bangkok for the meeting of intellectuals and doctors who are planning on marching to the Cambodian border to offer pacifist assistance to the wounded, it becomes clear to the reader that what began as an admirable cause has become something overrun with publicity and glitz. Popular American figures join the meeting and the arguments begin between Europeans and Americans as to the true purpose of the cause. Any reality of the cause is quickly overshadowed by bickering and self-glorification. Once the group arrives at the wall on the border and requests, through a megaphone, entry into the country on peaceful grounds, the unseen Khmer Rouge on the other side of the bridge spanning the border answer the request with silence and indifference. Franz comes to the sudden realization that his participation in this admirable movement has been nothing but a well-intended act for his silent and watching (he imagines) Sabina. He knows that the movement itself has been a failure; whatever truth to be found in the cause will be seen only in the glamourized phoniness of the circumstances, presented to the world by the paparazzi. He longs to laugh the ironic laugh of the unbeliever, but squelches the desire. The narrator stops the representational story for a quick

Phenomenological Discussion:

That sudden desire of Franz's reminds us of something; yes, it reminds us of Stalin's son, who ran to electrocute himself on the barbed wire when he could no longer stand to watch the poles of human existence come so close to each other as to touch [discussed in the two chapters which begin "The Grand March"], when there was no longer any difference between sublime and squalid, angel and fly, God and shit.

Franz could not accept the fact that the glory of the Grand March was equal to the comic vanity of its marchers, that the exquisite noise of European history was lost in an infinite silence and that there was no longer any difference between history and silence. He felt like placing his own life on the scales; he wanted to prove that the Grand March weighed more than shit. (268-9)

Franz's discovery of the truth of the situation forces him to recognize his own feelings toward the Grand March and its implications. He longs to prove the entire movement to be correct, acceptable, good, but is unable to accept the fact that the truth of the situation (the indifference of the Khmer Rouge and the vanity of the participants) is something ugly and worthless: shit. The narrator's Phenomenological Discussion digression for the representational story is the only means by which Kundera is able to explain these feelings and this attitude.

The digression explains something else for the reader. Franz's love for the admirable movement of the Grand March is a love for weight and universal return. A Grand March for the purpose of truth and beauty (for Franz, truth=justice for the Cambodian victims, beauty=he risks his life for the unseen glory of Sabina) is

something for which Franz exists; it is a longing for something eternal, cyclical, and never-changing. The discovery that something so weighty and good could actually be equal to something as disgustingly universal as the ubiquity of shit, then, is more than Franz is able to bear. The digression makes the situation clear for the reader in order to convey the understanding that Franz's code word, kitsch, is yet another avenue through which the concept of eternal return, lightness, and weight can be explored.

Likewise, the counterpointing of Franz's character with Tereza's thoughts on "idyll" (which appear only a few pages after Franz's epiphany) is the narrator's manner of assisting the reader to see the two sides of "weight" as being positive and negative. The narrator's digressions allow the reader to comprehend the theory of eternal return as being something good, in Tereza's case since she sees the idyll as a motif of eternal security and pleasure, and something bad, due to Franz's discovery that beneath the abstraction of the Grand March lies a bed of universal shit, the adverse element of eternal return.

Throughout the entire novel, however, the counterpoints of lightness and weight are achieved only through the narrator's balance of representation and essayistic digression. The reader is introduced to both character

and philosophy, working in coordination (with the possible exception of the "Grand March" whose violation of symmetry is not necessarily a negative aspect of the novel), variations in concentration, and elaborate exploration. Kundera does not answer the questions he asks, but he does explore all of the possibilities through the use of paradoxical formulas.

What is the nature of "lightness" and "weight"? How does the word "kitsch" tie in with their meanings? What is an "idyll"? What are the "birds of fortuity"? Most importantly, which is better, "lightness" or "weight"? Like the ideas of graphomania, litost, the border, and forgetting in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, Unbearable Lightness offers the reader a full exploration not only of the main themes of the novel, seen through terminal paradoxes, but also the gray areas between the two dielectal poles. And, with this fifth novel, Kundera makes certain to avoid any imbalance or bias in his discussion. Tomas may be crushed under a weight after a life of seeking lightness, a negative outcome, but Sabina's "escape" from the novel demonstrates a positive aspect of the tendency. Franz recognizes the ugliness of weight and eternal return shortly before his death, but Tereza, we are to understand, dies a happy woman once she recognizes the positive aspect of the theory. Which side

of the query is better? Kundera offers no answers. He only explores the questions through digressions.

Notes

¹The film was directed by Philip Kaufman, shot by Sven Nykvist, and starred Daniel Day-Lewis, Lena Olin, and Juliet Binoche. The Joke was also filmed, but not released internationally.

²Nietzsche's theory of eternal return, indeed, seems to be a more sophisticated (though less colorful) version of "the laughter of angels" in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. If angel laughter represents a cyclical ring of self-delusion and blinded paradisaical utopia, Nietzsche's theory of an eternal recurrence of horrific absurdity on the face of the earth is the extreme opposite.

³It is true that Kundera thought about Tomas for many years before the publication of this novel. In an interview given to Jason Weiss, published by New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly (Spring 1986), Kundera remarked that he had been wanting to write Unbearable Lightness for the past twenty-five years but was only able to do so after he had decided upon some form of counterpoint for the characters of Tomas and Tereza (405).

⁴As is the case with the other four novels, the political situation in Czechoslovakia plays right along with Kundera's themes. In Unbearable Lightness, the oppression of the Czech people can be seen clearly as a symbol of "weight" for a population desiring relief and "lightness."

⁵One critic notes that Tereza's name may have been derived from the Nazi concentration camp Terezin, characterized by nakedness, abstraction, and ugliness. The motif of the concentration camp, seen in the final chapter of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, appears in Tereza's two sections of the novel through descriptions of her dreams. One dream in particular depicts Tereza's naked corpse being thrown into the back of a truck with the naked corpses of Tomas' mistresses.

⁶This is one of the weaknesses of the novel since Tomas is said to be happy on the farm in the country, but the narrator chooses not to digress upon his character in this section because it is possible that Tomas is not really happy away from Prague and women. On the other hand, since Tomas continually tries to reject the inevitabilities of life through betrayal (and Es Muss Sein!), the country life might be perceived as an end to

these betrayals. Kundera never tells this to the reader, though, so Tomas' final condition remains a mystery.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION: THE NARRATOR LOOKS TO THE FUTURE

As I have illustrated in the previous chapters, the technique of novelistic digression, in all of its six forms appears to be Kundera's chief literary tool in returning the novel's form to its roots. With this technique the Czech novelist places himself in the position of control which permits the freedom of expression Kundera has found to be essential to the twentieth-century novelist. Indeed, his statement, "Well, I'll never tire of repeating: The novel's sole raison d'etre is to say what only the novel can say" (Art 36) is a creed which is typical of Kundera's attitude towards his art.

Kundera prefers this freedom to the rigors and limitations of novelistic guidelines which he sees as controlling so many other novelists. "Philosophical" novels, "psychological" novels, and literary works whose sole purpose is social activism are avenues for the genre which the Czech novelist rejects. For him, these "isms" and popular movements represent an ignorance for the playfulness which exists at the core of the novel's evolution. In any case, when Kundera considers the overpowering beliefs in myths in the twentieth century and the binding destruction such delusions bring, he finds

that the only purpose for the novelist is to destroy those myths through playful dissection and questioning. Any other avenue produces repetition and ignorance.

And what happens when there is no destruction of myth? What happens when the dissenting, ironic voice cannot be heard? Ludvik Jahn, cast away from his "circle" of communists by his own sense of humor explores possible answers to these questions through his digressions in The Joke. The narrator of Life Is Elsewhere, with the idealistic Jaromil and fiercely loyal Maman as topics, investigates each related question by digressing from the story. By placing a submissive Ruzena in the ring of self-delusion and the domineering Jakub beyond the ring's border in The Farewell Party, Kundera offers his readers a lighter, more comic exploration through an occasional digression. Foregrounding the question and exploring the forms it takes is the task of the narrator's digressions on Tamina and her fellow victims in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. And, as the last chapter of this thesis indicates, balancing the digressions which explore Tomas, Tereza, Sabina, and Franz with the digressions which explore the themes related to idealism and cynicism is Kundera's purpose in The Unbearable Lightness of Being. No prey to the dangers of convention and idealistic belief, Kundera's five novels probe the questions instead of submitting to prefabricated answers.

At the same time, Kundera does not reject the forms and basic groundwork laid out by Cervantes, Diderot, and Sterne. But in accepting the playfulness and the experimentation which characterizes the works of these figures, Kundera's novels do not repeat or mimic the same topics. Aside from proving nothing, such endeavors would hardly be appropriate for "the trap the world has become," as discovered by the "Pleiad of Central Europe." Kundera, then, chooses to travel on the same road as these centuries-old literary figures, but with an awareness that the road has changed. He must carry an updated torch to light his way.

It is possible, however, that Kundera is alone in this journey. Mass production of literature, mass media presentation of received ideas, the dissonant and conventional (possibly cyclical) forms produced in rock music and on television, and the political tyrannies on both sides of the Atlantic ocean have, for Kundera, only added to the power of self-delusion and the "ring." Jordan Elgrably's "Conversations With Milan Kundera" contains a photograph of a middle-aged man with a furrowed brow opposite a statement of dissent:

This automatism of technique is the constant danger of all musical composition. But the same danger threatens all the arts, and most especially the novel. Look at the immense world production of novels! Novels are virtually beginning to write themselves; it is not the authors but the "automatism and convention of novel technique" which

writes them. An author, a true author, must therefore be constantly vigilant against this enormous weight. (4)

It is debatable as to whether or not Kundera is alone in this struggle against the weight. But from this study of the five novels with which he exposes and explores the weight, we must conclude that Kundera is adamant in his approach. The dangerous myths of Jaromil must be brought to light. Ludvik's ironic voice must be heard.

And what better medium is there for such exposition than the playful and light-hearted novel? Where else can an ironically minded narrator laugh at conventions and institutions but through the digressions of one of humankind's most liberated artistic forms? No cynic, Kundera sees in the novel the chance to pull together the two poles of the dialectic or, at the very least, to explore or bridge the span with ironic humor. Between Tereza and Sabina, Ludvik and Helena, and Jakub and Ruzena lies the gray area of "the border" which Kundera's playful digressions explore.

Kundera is aware that there is a belief that the novel is dead. He knows that, in many ways, the narrative voice vanished from the genre in the nineteenth century and that, for many people, the disappearance registered a rejection of the sense of humor possessed by the novel's eighteenth-century fathers. But for Kundera, despite the loss of hope in the world which occurred at

the beginning of this century, the novel can still live by adding a tone of irony to its voice. It must continue to evolve:

Does this [the idea that the novel must die] mean that, "in a world grown alien to it," the novel will disappear? That it will leave Europe to founder in the "forgetting of being"? That nothing will be left but the endless babble of graphomaniacs, nothing but novels that come after the history of the novel? I don't know. I merely believe I know that the novel cannot live in peace with the spirit of our time: if it is to go on discovering the undiscovered, to go on "progressing" as novel, it can do so only against the progress of the world.
(Art 19)

The digression, in its various types and delivered by the ironic voice, is Kundera's chief tool to execute this discovery of the undiscovered.

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